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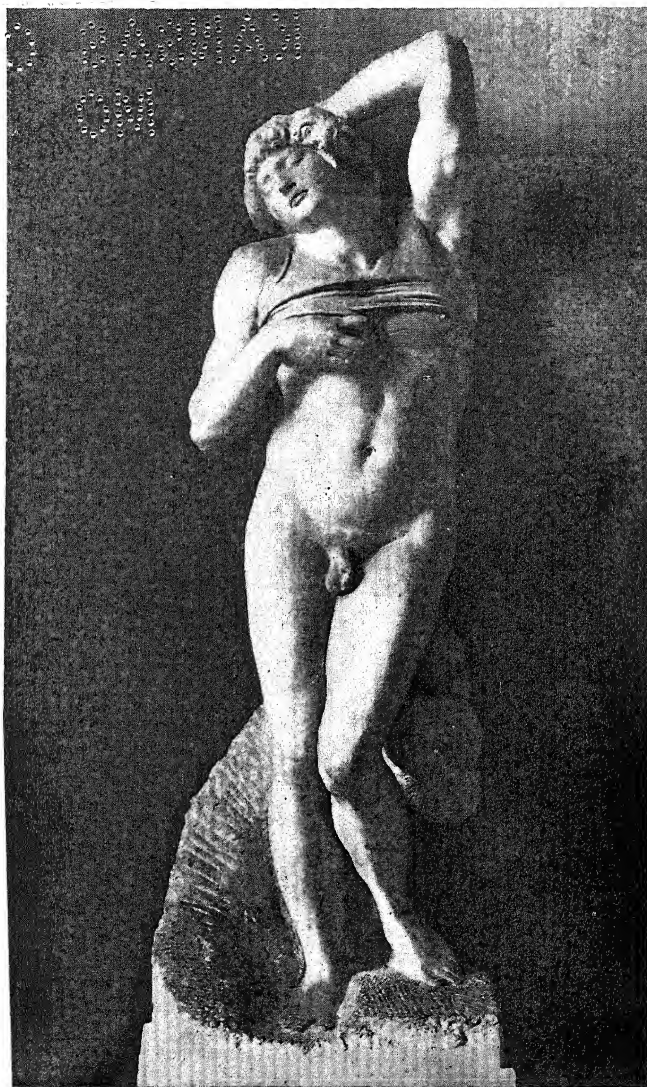
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DYING YOUTH
Louvre, Paris

THE ART OF MICHELANGELO

BY

H. H. POWERS

PRESIDENT OF THE BUREAU OF UNIVERSITY TRAVEL

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TO
LORADO TAFT
AN ARTIST NOT UNMINDFUL OF THE
THINGS OF THE SPIRIT

PREFACE

The purpose of this little book is to contribute to a better understanding and to a fuller emotional appreciation of the art of Michelangelo. No attempt has been made to write a life of the artist or to catalogue his works or to discuss their genesis or attribution. Much doubtless remains to be done in these lines but it is no part of my purpose nor does it seem necessary to my purpose. We do not know all about Michelangelo's life but we know the essentials. We do not know all his works but we know the most important. No addition or subtraction can modify our judgment of his art. I have therefore accepted current conclusions both as to the artist and the list of his works. I have sometimes repeated a story illustrative of the man or his times, quite conscious that it may be a myth, a retroactive account of "the way it ought to have happened," but convinced that it is not the less significant for that reason. In short I have taken from reputable and careful authors my materials for the scaffolding of fact which was necessary to my purpose. Farther research may modify these materials but it will hardly endanger the structure.

I am aware of the dangers of an emotional approach to art. There is an inherent conflict between scientific inquiry and emotional appreciation. The scientist must be "cold blooded," entirely free from emotional bias in

his search for truth. There is a science of art and it must be conducted in this spirit. But it nevertheless remains true that we may know all there is to know about a picture and if we have not *felt*, we do not know it as art. Art is born of feeling and is addressed to feeling. "The things of the spirit are spiritually discerned." This is true in an exceptional degree of the art of Michelangelo, one of the most extraordinary emotional natures ever devoted to the service of art.

All this, of course, is familiar and as fully recognized by those engaged in scientific and factual inquiry as by others. It is commonly assumed, however, that while facts can be learned and taught, emotion must be left to itself; that we can not stimulate or guide feeling to any purpose. It is this assumption with which I take issue. I am quite aware of the futility of mere superlatives and interjections and all the commonplace expressions of emotion in the presence of art. Nevertheless there is a way to lead "through intellectual analysis to emotional synthesis," to crown scientific explanation with appropriate emotional appreciation. Whether I have found that way the reader will judge.

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INTRODUCTION

I have often wonder'd whether I should have cared for Michelangelo if I had known him in the flesh. In his art I adore him as did his contemporaries almost to a man. The hours which, year after year for nearly half a century, I have been privileged to spend under the great vault which makes him immortal have been the most memorable of my life. Despite obstacles to appreciation such as are encountered nowhere else — the physical discomfort of looking, the din of tramping feet, the confusion of voices competing for attention, the desecrating laugh at irrelevant stories offered in lieu of interpretation — despite all this, prophet and sibyl still weave their spell as when Julius and Bramante first gazed upon them. Art judgments as diverse as the temperaments of those who pronounce them unite in according to Michelangelo, the artist, a unique place. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the world's classification of artists Michelangelo is one class and the other artists are the other. So he was rated in his own day and so, gladly or grudgingly, he is rated still.

Michelangelo, the man, is less easily appraised. To his contemporaries, even to those who knew him best, he was difficult, a compound of inharmonious and not wholly lovable qualities. Not that he was guilty of the moral delinquencies which characterized an artist like Cellini or a poet like Aretino. The malignity so common in art circles and of which he so often believed himself to be the victim tempted him to no act or threat of violence. The licentiousness which in his day was the unquestioned privilege of genius made no appeal to him.

Though unbusinesslike in accounting for the funds entrusted to him for the execution of his commissions his integrity is above question. Industrious, abstemious, wedded to his art, and deaf to all the siren voices about him he is hardly less eminent in the fundamentals of character than in art.

But if the virtues command respect it is the graces that win affection. With these Michelangelo was less favorably endowed. Not that he was lacking in delicate perception or fine feeling; quite the contrary. But living in a world of thought and feeling which few are privileged to enter he lived too much apart from other men to share their interests or develop those amenities which facilitate social relations and win regard. In this realm of mundane but subtle relations he was strangely oblivious and unaccountable. The familiar story of his meeting with Charles V is a characteristic but by no means a unique example. When the Emperor came to Rome he paid the artist the compliment of visiting him in his studio. As he entered, followed by his brilliant train, he called out: "Keep on your cap," a privilege unheard of in the Emperor's presence. When asked later by a wondering courtier why he had shown the artist this unprecedented honor the Emperor replied: "Oh, he would have kept it on anyway."

Why would he have kept on his cap? Not as a deliberate affront, we may be sure. Michelangelo had nothing of that contempt for royalty and hereditary prestige which has sometimes been felt by genius, notably by Beethoven. While independent in his judgments and never hesitating to criticise the acts of individual popes and monarchs, he had a profound respect for constituted authority and for those in whom it was vested. He would have kept on his cap not out of disrespect but

simply because he would have forgotten to take it off. The Emperor had been forewarned and forestalled a seeming affront by unheard of courtesy. The Emperor was a diplomat; the artist was not. But if the Emperor could distinguish between obliviousness and disrespect the world could not and it punished then as always the man who did not doff his cap.

Not all of Michelangelo's peculiarities, however, could be thus accounted for. He seemed strangely compounded of inconsistent and not always lovable qualities. Though generous to a fault his inconsiderate demands upon his patrons for money made him seem penurious and sordid. In reality one of the kindest of men he could be pitilessly frank and even savagely sarcastic at unexpected moments. He had no deeper passion than friendship and the love of human beings, yet he presented to the world a barrier of taciturnity and morbid sensitiveness which deterred all but the most devoted spirits and condemned him to a life of spiritual isolation. He gave freely and in strict anonymity to help struggling artists, yet more than one was crushed by a withering criticism which from his lips was a sentence of doom.

Is it strange that such a man should have had few friends and many enemies even though the world joined in unanimity of recognition and reverence? Compassionate yet merciless, indulgent yet exacting, kindly yet tactless, generous yet parsimonious, loyal yet intractable, courageous yet subject to unreasoning panic, he stands as a character marred by many a crotchet and unlovely trait, yet of indisputable nobility and spiritual elevation.

How shall we explain such a character? There have not been wanting those who would seek the key in environment. Michelangelo, we are told, fell upon evil

days and struggled with adverse conditions. The material and spiritual poverty of his childhood home, the worldliness and uncongenial temper of the papal court left its mark upon his spirit. Certain it is that the sixteenth century was not ideally suited to develop the spiritual element in art or the lovable traits in human character. Patrons like Leo X and Clement VII and Alessandro de' Medici were not the ones to inspire him to the highest achievement. But while these patrons furnished abundant occasion for those somber and pessimistic moods which grew upon him and gave a deepening pathos to his art, they were only the occasion, not the cause. They but furthered a development the nature of which was predetermined.

If there were untoward elements in his environment there were others that were extraordinarily favorable. Not for two thousand years had conditions been so favorable to the creation of art nor are such conditions likely soon to recur. Three centuries of devoted effort on the part of gifted men had solved many of the artist's problems and a finished technique was ready for his use. If Michelangelo's childhood and education were barren, what conditions could have been more favorable to the development of his peculiar genius than those two years at the table of Lorenzo or those other years at the feet of the soul awakening Savonarola? And although he owed to Julius II not a few of his vexations and his one supreme disappointment, who of the world's great art patrons would have been more congenial to Michelangelo than this same Julius? Despite the vicissitudes of his career and the thwarting of his most cherished ambition we must conclude that the fates were kind to Michelangelo, quite as kind as to Raphael whose serenity irradiates the age. Circumstances do not account for

Michelangelo. Men are what they are and character finds in circumstance its pretext rather than its explanation.

But if circumstances do not determine character they largely determine opportunity and thus have much to do with determining what a man may accomplish. It was Michelangelo who made the Moses and the Dying Youth and determined what they should be, but it was Julius and his successors who interrupted the work and robbed them of their larger significance. It was they who set him to paint the Sistine Ceiling and the Last Judgment but it was Michelangelo who determined the spirit of the one and the very different spirit of the other. Even a work so obviously related to political conditions as the Medicean Tombs finds in those conditions rather its occasion than its cause. Throughout his long career Michelangelo's powerful personality maintains itself tenaciously in his art, using circumstances and limited by circumstances, yet maintaining its integrity to the last. It would be difficult to find a more striking example of the indomitable nature of personality.

It is thus in a limited sense that we are interested in the events of Michelangelo's life. Mere biography as such will not detain us. Our concern is with the art of Michelangelo, not merely with the individual works from his hand but with that larger spiritual fact of which these are the fragmentary and imperfect expression. Through the maze of activities and happenings we seek his sculpture, his painting, and above and beyond these his art, his personality.

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS IN FLORENCE

The story of Michelangelo's life, exhaustively studied and often told, calls for attention here only as a background for his art. Born in 1475 of Florentine parents, his childhood and youth were spent in the famous Tuscan city. His father, descended from the petty nobility, was poor and of limited horizon but honest, an example of petty bourgeois virtues. The brothers and sisters like the parents seem to have been nowise remarkable. Their total lack of art faculty, appreciation, and interest is noteworthy.

The father took his noble lineage — his sole inheritance — very seriously, deriving from it little save its prejudices and inhibitions which were destined to be in several ways of concern to his son. Of particular interest was the conviction that manual labor was incompatible with nobility of birth, a prejudice unfortunate for an impecunious family and not easily reconciled with the demands of art. It is noteworthy that though Michelangelo had to overcome this obstacle he shared in a degree the family feeling and was careful to draw the line in accordance with its supposed requirements. Though proud of his art he resented the imputation of having kept a *bottega* or commercial studio after the manner of Donatello and in later years he incurred both self denial and the imputation of penuriousness to provide his father with the landed estate appropriate to his rank.

Sent to school with a view to preparation for the eligible profession of the law, his listlessness slowly deepened into a passive resistance fatal to the family hopes. Against the father's protest but aided by sympathetic outside influences he was apprenticed at the age of thirteen to Ghirlandajo, the ablest painter in Florence but of all the artists of the period the one least able to understand the new pupil or to inspire his loyalty. Michelangelo's later contemptuous assertion that "Ghirlandajo taught me nothing" is an exaggeration for the influence of Ghirlandajo is clearly traceable in his painting, but the influence is purely technical. As regards the essentials of art the two had nothing in common and the master neither inspired the pupil nor commanded his respect. There is little reason to suppose that Michelangelo concealed his feelings more tactfully at this time than later. The relation soon became strained to the annoyance of Ghirlandajo who doubtless despaired of the future of this capable but intractable youth.

A year or more the relation lasted and then Michelangelo was transferred — or unceremoniously transferred himself — to the garden of Lorenzo where some youths were being encouraged to work at sculpture under the influence of Lorenzo's antiques. The aged Bertoldo, an experienced craftsman chiefly remembered as a former assistant of the great Donatello, was placed in charge.

Bertoldo was much less of a personality than Ghirlandajo. A slavish imitator of the antique his homage was as indiscriminating as it was abject. He worked only in relief and seems to have found his models chiefly in the Roman sarcophagi with which he was familiar. His extant works include friezes of cupids, vases, and other classical bric-a-brac made as a setting for

Donatello's scenes from the Passion of our Lord on the bronze pulpits of San Lorenzo, and copies of battle scenes from decadent sarcophagi made for no purpose whatever.

How definitely Bertoldo stood in the relation of master to these youths we do not know. No doubt they profited by his advice and technical instruction, but as the relation involved nothing of the irksome service obligations usually involved in apprenticeship, it lacked both the motive and the means for that discipline which Michelangelo and perhaps others of the group had already known. We may assume that the relation was a loose one and that for our youth at least it involved little of hampering restraint. Bertoldo made little impression upon him and soon dropped out of his life. No recorded remark suggests that Michelangelo remembered his existence. Poor Bertoldo! How came this bird of Jove to be feathered in his nest?

But it is not Bertoldo that makes this episode of the garden memorable. It was here that Michelangelo attracted the attention of the first of those master personalities who were to contribute so amazingly to the development of his fortunes. The familiar story may be briefly told.

One day the owner of the garden entered and observed the youths at work. Among them was one who was carving from a fragment of waste marble a faun mask. The great man stopped, looked, and finally spoke. His observations were not profound — he was speaking to a boy — but they were the words of Lorenzo de' Medici, the first citizen and the subtlest intelligence in Florence. He told the boy that the grotesque effect at which he was evidently aiming would have been heightened if he had knocked out a tooth or two. The boy, quite too embarrassed to reply, heeded the suggestion



FAUN MASK
Bargello, Florence

and the Magnifico, returning another day, observed and was pleased. The result was an invitation to the youth to become a member of the Medicean household and of that circle, perhaps the most remarkable ever gathered under a single roof, that epitomized the learning and culture of the Renaissance. We are at a loss which to admire most, the ill bred and ill favored boy of fifteen who could enter this princely household and adapt himself to its difficult requirements, or the penetration of the great magician who perceived beneath this uncouth exterior the genius that surpassed them all.

Certainly the Faun Mask as we see it in the National Museum in Florence is not thus revealing to ordinary eyes. It is expressive in its way but trivial and in no way suggestive of Michelangelo's genius. The modeling is clever, so clever that some have doubted its authenticity declaring it to be impossible for a youth of fifteen. Impossible perhaps for *any other* youth of fifteen, but not for one who all his life long was to do impossible things. The Mask is in all probability authentic but its chief interest is its connection with this incident.

It is important for us to picture clearly to our minds the conditions which prevailed in this household in which Michelangelo was to spend his most impressionable years. There have been many princely patrons of art but surely never another like Lorenzo de' Medici. Other patrons have been free with their bounty, with their friendship and their time, but hardly another has carried his favor to the extent of virtual adoption. Such was essentially the practice of Lorenzo. Under his roof dwelt in fullest family intimacy, representatives of those varied branches of art and learning, which it was his enlightened pleasure to foster. Each had his room with appropriate belongings and suitable provision for his wants,

even an allowance of spending money. Most noteworthy of all, each had the privilege of sons in the family, the ruling principle in which was freedom and unconventional intimacy. It was the rule of the household that whoso came first to meals sat next to the Magnifico himself, others following in the order of their arrival. This arrangement assured not only frequent access to Lorenzo but the fullest possible mixing and acquaintance among this remarkable company. When we recall that each of these adopted members of the household was a remarkable man and a positive personality, the wonder grows that this supreme master of men should have been able to dominate such a household without repression or conventional restraint.

It was into such a household that this soul-starved boy of fifteen was transferred from the cramped parental household where a sickly mother, a number of selfish and worthless brothers, a narrow and stubborn father found a grievance in his passion for art. From his childhood, we are told, he had been beaten for this passion which none of his family understood and which to the end they appreciated only as a means of filling the family purse. No association with the uninspired Ghirlandajo or the poor hack, Bertoldo, who guided his studies in the garden could have prepared him for a transition so momentous.

Among the members of this Table Round to which Michelangelo was now admitted, were men to whom the world is more indebted than its short memory suggests. Such was Luigi Pulci, the raciest of humorists and popular poets, Angelo Poliziano, the most polished classical scholar and finished poet of his time and the foremost representative of the humanist philosophy, Pico della Mirandola, the great oriental scholar, and Marsilio

Ficino, the Platonist whose dream it was to unite the Philosophy of this greatest of Greek minds with the teachings of the Christian faith. Not one of these was without influence upon the youthful Michelangelo who, with all his independence of character was at this time highly receptive. His sonnets reflect the influence of Poliziano and even that of Pulci. Most important, however, was the influence of Ficino. When we see how Christian themes which had become in the art of the humanist painters the emptiest of dead forms, now live again with a meaning that transcends dogma we are reminded that this was precisely what Ficino and the Platonists sought to accomplish. They had at least one convert. Michelangelo, always a devout son of the church, professed himself throughout life a Christian Platonist.

What was happening in the garden during these two years of residence in the great palace? The Faun Mask quickly lost interest. It was but a plaything from the first and now that he was taken seriously he felt encouraged to attempt more serious things. A single work remains from this period, the Battle of the Centaurs now preserved in the Casa Buonarroti, an unfinished relief which we might attribute to the suggestion of Bertoldo did we not know that it was suggested by Poliziano. As a classical subject and a relief involving numerous figures the choice must at least have met with Bertoldo's approval. The work is so far superior to the Faun Mask that we are tempted to think that other works may have intervened but of such we have no knowledge. Though probably Michelangelo's first serious attempt, it is an epoch making work.

Reverting for a moment to Bertoldo's battle scene and to the ancient sarcophagi which suggested it we

note that the traditional field is a long rectangle in which the figures are necessarily arranged in rows. This zone composition, long traditional in both painting and sculptured relief, is easy and convenient but it is incapable of that concentration and focus which the intenser themes of the Renaissance required. This of course did not disturb Bertoldo. It had the sanction of the ancients and was doubtless held up as an example to Michelangelo who nominally adopts it but introduces changes which in effect amount to its complete rejection.

First of all, he has shortened the rectangle to an approximate square, thus of necessity condensing the group. The rows of heads are still traceable, the upper row plainly, the others faintly and with numerous interruptions. But the artist instinctively feels that his group must have a center, a focus. This is a necessity of all art. It must have a visual unity, something which dominates the whole and to which all else contributes. So he lifts out a single figure in the center, opening the lower rows to give a fuller view, and thus challenging attention. But this is only the beginning. Nothing could be more ingenious than the way in which this hurly burly of struggling figures breaks from the square into the round and weaves itself into a garland-like frame around this dominant central figure. Nothing is forced or unnatural. Not a leg or an arm is in a position not plausibly explained by the action. It would be difficult to find a composition more instructive to analyze or more representative of the principles of the realistic art of the Renaissance. Naturalness, position and action self explained, self motivated, yet order, pattern, conformity to bounding lines and setting, these inexorable requirements have never been better met than by this relatively untaught youth of seventeen.



BATTLE OF THE CENTAURS
Casa Buonarroti, Florence

But this is more than composition, more than sculpture. It is *art* and thoroughly representative of the temperament soon to be revealed in the great ceiling. Here is no fret and fume of little souls. All is deadly serious, dignified, majestic. Here already are the large souled, life-weary Titans who are to remain with him to the end. Already he is Michelangelo.

The work was apparently in progress when Lorenzo died. This marked the end of his residence in the great house with its goodly fellowship, probably, too, the end of the garden privilege and the relation with Bertoldo. Work in hand at the time was necessarily interrupted. If there was opportunity to resume it later the artist did not care to do so. † His conception of sculpture had changed. He had passed under other influences and subjects and ideals of a very different character now appealed to his imagination.

Already in the second year of his sojourn in the great palace Florence was stirred by the voice of the mighty monk who was so soon to be the controlling influence in her destiny. Soon all Florence began to stream to San Marco and then to the great Duomo whose vast depths themselves could scarce accommodate the throng of the curious and some of the conscience stricken, impelled by that strange hunger that men feel for the words of condemnation and of doom. Is it that only the messenger of condemnation can be the messenger of grace?

Such a phenomenon could not pass unnoticed in the great house. The monk's preaching naturally occasioned anxiety to those who bore the heavy responsibility of maintaining order in a turbulent city. But we shall quite misjudge the temper of a Ficino, a Poliziano, even of a Lorenzo, if we think of them as actuated by petty jealousy or resentment. We must not imagine from the

furious invective of Savonarola or from the indulgent morals of the Medicean court that the attitude of the table company or of its head was altogether unsympathetic toward the message that was thundered from the Duomo. Doubtless they disapproved of the monk's extreme denunciations and were incredulous as to the possibility of that universal regeneration which he so peremptorily demanded, incredulous even as to its entire applicability to their individual cases, but the ideals of the stern preacher were not theoretically at variance with those of Ficino or Lorenzo.

This family of the elect heard Savonarola. It is to one of their number, Pico della Mirandola, that we are chiefly indebted for our knowledge of his power. Beyond question, therefore, Michelangelo was one of his hearers. For three years, from the age of sixteen to nineteen, he was under this most potent of influences. During the first of these three years he still dwelt in the great house. But the master mind was now relaxing its grip. Disease, long present, was now finishing its fatal work and the head of the table was doubtless often absent from the seat which he was soon to vacate forever. Upon his death at the end of the first year of the great monk's preaching, Michelangelo left the great house and returned to the cheerless home of his childhood. Under these changed conditions we can imagine the increasing ascendancy of the mighty preacher. It was not simply that Michelangelo was young and the preacher's power unusual. There was between the two a temperamental sympathy which was soon to be revealed in the artist's master work. In particular Michelangelo responded with all the passionate intensity of his nature to the stern monk's appeal for liberty and popular government and for purity in public and private life. This meant

the end of Medicean rule, and Michelangelo, though still retaining his friendship for members of the illustrious house, ever after appears as the passionate opponent of their rule in Florence. Thus were planted the seeds of that permanent conflict which was to play so momentous a part in his later life. Feeling the sense of obligation as strongly as he felt all other things he could never absolve himself of his obligation to a house whose favor he had unwittingly accepted. And in turn, feeling with ten-fold intensity the need of liberty for the realization of manhood, he learned from Savonarola while yet in his teens, to execrate the family which had been chiefly instrumental in its suppression. The school of Savonarola had supplanted the school of Lorenzo, not undoing its work, for such influences can never be effaced, but changing the earlier perspective and crowning all with its own intensely spiritual ideals.

What was the *sculptor* doing during these two years that he remained in Florence after leaving the Medicean palace? Nominally the Medicean rule continued under the leadership of the tactless Piero. Outwardly things remained as before. But the preaching of the terrible monk continued, ever bolder and more uncompromising, and the spirit of Florence underwent for a time a profound change. It was a change by no means favorable to the interests of a young artist who was suddenly thrown out upon the world and confronted with the necessity of earning his living. It would be interesting to know by what odd jobs he lived during the next two years, what was the amount of his income. But no one was interested as yet to record the experiences of this obscure youth who was but one of hundreds in like case. We hear of him called to the palace to model a snow image with what result and for what recompense we are

not told. It is doubtful if he received any commission for sculpture or disposed of any serious work during this period. Certainly no *Battle of the Centaurs* or work of like character would have found a purchaser among the followers of Savonarola.

A beautiful relief now in the Casa Buonarroti, the *Madonna of the Stair*, may be assigned with much probability to this period. Alleged defects of drawing and an obvious resemblance to the low relief of Donatello have induced certain critics to assign it to an earlier date than the *Battle of the Centaurs* but other considerations seem to be overwhelmingly against such an assignment. The influences of this earlier period were pronouncedly classical while those of the Savonarola period following were exclusively Christian. The defects—hardly noticeable to any but an expert—are surely such as might appear in the work of a sculptor even at the ripe age of nineteen, and the influence of Donatello is to be traced in the work of Michelangelo for years to come. The work is practically completed and is exquisitely finished as if intended for sale as it would have been if made at this time when earning was urgent. It does not appear that Michelangelo sold it but that, alas, is no novelty in the experience of a young artist.

The finish of this relief surpassing that of the finest cameo, the naturalness of the pose, the grave beauty of the *Madonna*, and the exquisite modeling of the child impress the most casual observer. Only reflection and comparison reveal the fact that it is well nigh revolutionary in its conception of the *Madonna*. Previous *Madonnas* had been essentially of the ecclesiastical type, formal, enthroned, in a church or in churchly surroundings, both mother and child facing an assumed audience of worshippers. Leonardo is usually credited, and



MADONNA OF THE STAIR
Casa Buonarroti, Florence

justly, with the introduction of the natural type. The Madonna comes down from her throne and goes with the children out into the fields and sits among the flowers. She relaxes and a smile appears on her beautiful face. We share her relief that the strain of worship and of sanctity is remitted. But beautiful as is this new creation it must be confessed that she ceases to embody the religious spirit so long associated with the Madonna. She becomes simply a lovely woman.

Michelangelo's departure from tradition is different but not less pronounced than that of Leonardo. There is no church, no throne, no attendant saint, no consciousness of worshipful congregation. The Madonna is alone with her child and her thoughts. She is not in a flowery field but in an humble interior. The unrestraint of complete privacy is apparent. Every trace of formality has disappeared. She is *en negligé*. The formal head dress, familiar since the time of Cimabue, becomes a simple drape flung on with careless ease. The child is at the breast, his pulpy arm bulged out against the mother's firmer wrist. The naturalism of the whole rivals that of Leonardo.

But the Madonna is not simply a lovely woman. Church and throne and saints, all symbols and accessories of her exalted state, are absent but she is Madonna still by a deeper right than Leonardo or Raphaël ever knew. This is our first acquaintance with that large souled creature whose thought so far transcends her humble surroundings and the object of her mother love. It is a new conception, the unconventional and the ordinary made the vehicle of extraordinary meaning and exalted religious feeling.

This is perhaps the most significant difference between these two supreme representatives of the Renaissance,

Both accommodate themselves to the naturalistic temper of their age. Both retain the familiar religious themes but dispense with the traditional symbols and arbitrary insignia. But in so doing Leonardo subtly secularizes the theme while Michelangelo informs it with ever deeper spiritual feeling and import. Opinions will differ as to which made the better choice but hardly as to the nature of the choice they made.

One more influence must be noted before we close our survey of this eventful period. No young sculptor could have lived in Florence in those days without spending long hours before the famous doors of the Baptistery on which Ghiberti had spent half a century of his industrious life. In lyric beauty and technical skill they were, and have remained the wonder of the world. They were but a stone's throw from the great palace in which Michelangelo spent those two eventful years. That he knew and admired them we know from his oft quoted statement that they ought to be the Gates of Paradise.

Ghiberti was essentially a painter in bronze. He not only applied the principles of painting to bronze relief but even taught the painters things they had not discovered about their own art. His development of perspective, and even of atmospheric perspective, through careful gradations of relief with softening outline is unique in the history of art.

It is noteworthy that this use of perspective appears in both these early works. Certain figures in the upper row of the *Battle of the Centaurs* are so treated that they appear to recede into a comparatively distant background thus giving prominence to the central figure while taking their place in the composition. Similarly, the figures at the head of the stair in the other relief recede into a background as deep and as unmistakable

as in the work of any painter. This is a definite and successful beginning. But it is also the end. Never again does the sculptor admit perspective into an art to which he perceives that it is alien. Ghiberti is enticing but Michelangelo is not enticed.

And now, at the age of nineteen, this period of extraordinary apprenticeship closes and the youth seeks in a wider field the opportunity which for the moment is denied him in this home of the arts.

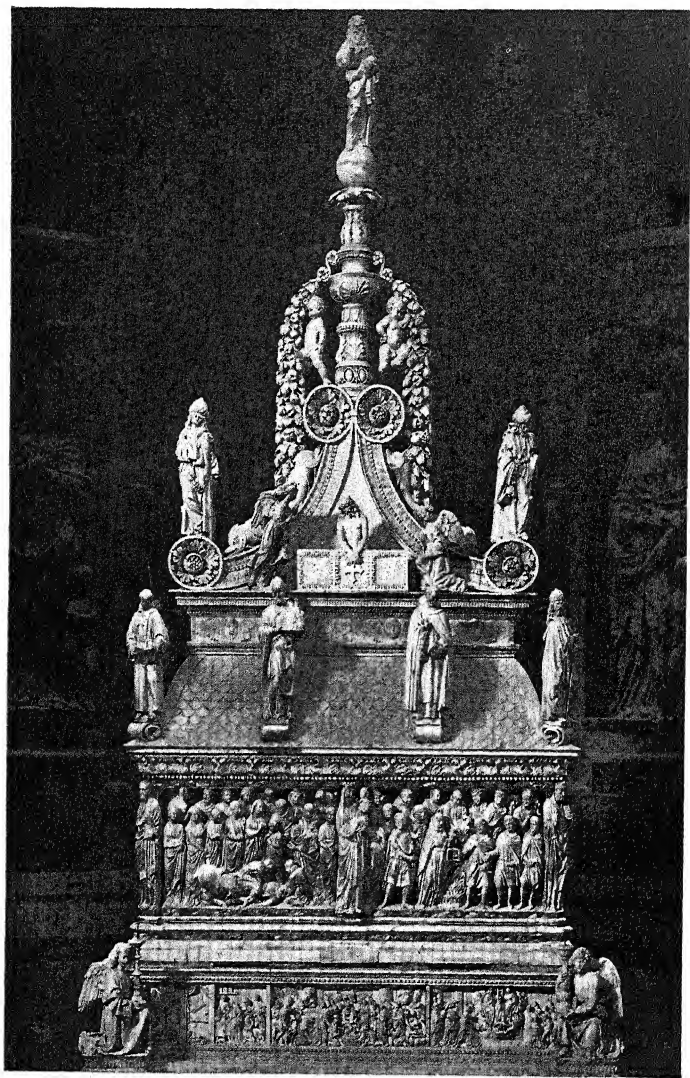
CHAPTER II

THE WAGE EARNER

With the death of Lorenzo and the passing of the Medicean house Florence passed still more completely under the control of Savonarola, no doubt with the approval of so devoted a follower as Michelangelo. Whatever might have been the result of longer association there can be little doubt that Michelangelo was in sympathy with Savonarola at this time. Savonarola, to be sure, is commonly accounted an enemy of art. Have we not heard of the pyramid of vanities? Let us not be deceived by this puritan raid upon the paganism and licentiousness of the Renaissance. In the deeper sense of the word, a sense instinctively recognized by Michelangelo, the great preacher was an artist to his finger tips. That he saw beauty in spiritual rather than in sensuous forms was not a limitation to one whose mission was the representation of the spiritual in plastic form. The emotion inspired by the apocalyptic visions of the great monk clothed itself spontaneously, to the mind of this, his spiritual kinsman, in forms such as appear upon the vault of the Sistine. Not that we are to attribute to this or to any other influence the profoundly spiritual bent of Michelangelo's art. That was predetermined by those inscrutable forces which we can reinforce or restrain but whose essential character we can not modify. Michelangelo was born with a mandate which no after influence had power to revoke, but it is not the less significant that in his progress toward self-realization he was subjected to a stimulus so wholly congenial.

But if Savonarola provided spiritual stimulus neither he nor the Florence that did his bidding furnished the employment by which a young artist might live. With the expulsion of the Medici and the looting of the great house the last hope of employment in Florence for a time disappeared. Work must therefore be sought elsewhere. We hear of him in Venice, a city devoted to painting rather than to sculpture. Our curiosity is piqued to know the incidents of this visit. What did he think of this colorful Queen of the Adriatic as contrasted with his own grey walled city? Did he meet John Bellini whose kindness to visiting artists has been extolled by Albert Durer? Did he see the Madonna of the Trees but lately finished and perceive beneath its stiff formalism that soulfulness which allied the work to his own? Above all did he meet in Bellini's studio those two youths, Giorgione and Titian, but two years younger than himself, whose fame was to rival his own? All this, perhaps, and more, but not that which he sought. Venice missed the opportunity to secure a work from the hand of Michelangelo.

Better fortune awaited him in Bologna where, in the great church of San Domenico, a shrine to the saint begun two and a half centuries before, still awaited completion. This wonderful shrine, begun by Niccolo Pisano about the middle of the thirteenth century and completed by two advanced sculptors at the end of the fifteenth, thus combining in a single work the beginning and the end of the Renaissance, makes a remarkable impression of unity and harmony. The work of Niccolo, finished in 1267, is limited to the sarcophagus proper. Another Niccolo, Niccolo da Bari, who was commissioned to complete the work after the long interval of more than two hundred years furnished the design of the shrine as

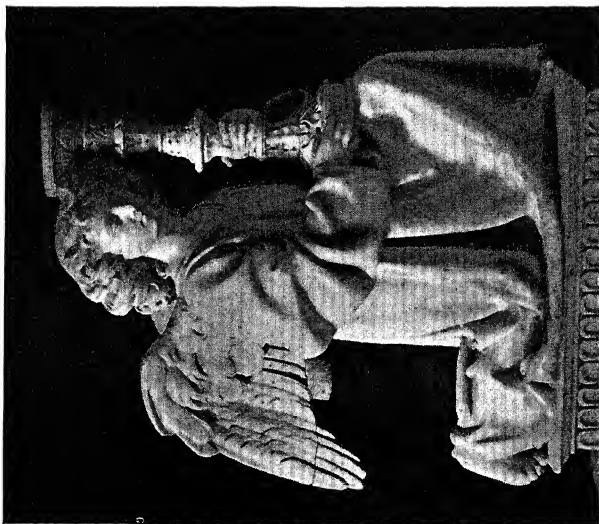


SHRINE OF SAINT DOMINIC
Church of San Domenico, Florence

it now stands and had nearly completed its execution when the work was interrupted by his death in the year of Michelangelo's visit. Of the statuettes which decorate the upper part of the shrine all had been finished except one which had apparently been roughed out. Of the two figures at the base, angels bearing candlesticks, one was completed, the other not begun.

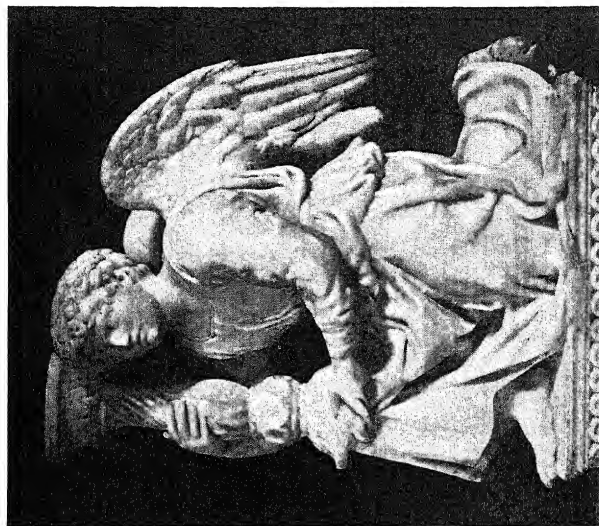
These Michelangelo was now allowed to finish. To employ an unknown sculptor only nineteen years of age on a work of the first importance may seem to have involved unusual hazard. The opportunity, however, was exceptionally favorable. To finish a statue already worked out in the rough involved little risk and attested his powers. At the worst the statues could be replaced later. But if these conditions were favorable for securing the commission they were a serious limitation upon the artist's originality. The character of the one statue was pre-determined by the work already done and that of the other by the fact that it must match a companion piece already executed. Neither were independent works of art but parts of a larger whole, in a word, decorations. This was something new for the artist and something for which the traditions of his time offered little guidance.

Passing by the statue of San Petronio above which obviously tells us little about Michelangelo we will confine our attention to the Angel of the Candlestick. This work, perhaps the first he ever executed for pay, is best appreciated in comparison with that of Niccolo da Bari of which it is necessarily the pendent. The two match perfectly, though they differ widely in detail and are sharply contrasted in sentiment. The earlier is a work of singular charm. The child face, the curling hair, the charming posture, all meet instant approval. But



By Niccolò da Bari

ANGELS WITH CANDLESTICKS
Shrine of St. Dominic, S. Domenico, Bologna



By Michelangelo

some things apparently did not meet the approval of the young Michelangelo. The draperies are heavy and the contrast of high lights and shadows is pronounced. He seems not to like the ragged contour of the wing or the sharp notch in the draperies behind the knee. So he gives the wing a smoother and truer contour, flexes the drapery differently behind the knee, and throws it into softer and less cloven folds, thus preserving a greater integrity of mass. There are other differences. The earlier work is sharp cut and distinct. The nostrils, the lips, the eyelids, the individual locks of hair are sharp cut and of exquisite delicacy. Those of Michelangelo are softened, seen as it were, through a mesh. No other work of Michelangelo has this quality. This is his conception of decorative sculpture. The sharp and definite treatment is too vivid, too challenging. It claims attention for the angel, for the detail rather than for the whole. There are other ways of securing this decorative subordination. One is to leave the work unfinished. This is merely a crude version of Michelangelo's exquisite technique. Another is to distort the figures by way of assimilation to architectural forms, thus building them into the structure to be decorated. This is a more drastic and, at its best, a far more effective method of decorative adaptation. But neither of these found favor in this age of supreme regard for the human figure in art. Michelangelo's softened treatment was the limit of compromise but not the less certainly a compromise.

So far the changes made by Michelangelo are in the interest of decorative adaptation. A glance at the face, however, discloses a change which is susceptible of no such explanation. The earlier angel has the guilelessness and unconcern of sunny childhood. That of Michelangelo has that large-eyed seriousness verging

upon pathos with which the Madonna of the Stair has already made us familiar. The change is in deference to Michelangelo's temperament which can not dissociate beauty from this deeper spiritual suggestiveness. It is the noblest of themes in art but one only moderately adapted to minor decorative works like this. But ungracious indeed must be the man who would press the point in such a presence.

A year or more Michelangelo was in Bologna but soon after his twentieth birthday he left, presumably because no further commissions were offered. We find him again in Florence where a lesser branch of the Medici who now veiled their unpopular kinship under the name of Popolani, gave him employment. The period is not one of memorable achievement. The engrossing task was that of earning a living, a task not a little aggravated, we may be sure, by the importunities of a family always inpecunious and never appreciative. A little Saint John of small significance and a Sleeping Cupid, now lost, are recorded as the product of a year's work. Florence, however, continued unfriendly to art. In the spring of that same year, 1496, Michelangelo had witnessed the burning of the Pyramid of Vanities in the public square. It was mostly rubbish but it marked a reaction against art which boded ill for his career there. So, taking with him his Sleeping Cupid (perhaps executed for the purpose) he sets out for Rome where the patronage of art had not been curtailed by reforming zeal.

There followed five years of memorable experience but of desultory and unsatisfactory employment crowned only toward the last by memorable achievement. It is noteworthy that the Sleeping Cupid which he brought as a sample of his art was classical in theme. He had

doubtless been informed as to Roman taste. The antique, rated not according to its excellence but solely according to its authenticity, was the obsession of art circles in Rome. The sale of the Cupid, passed off at the unscrupulous suggestion of a dealer as an antique, angered the purchaser but made the artist's reputation. Commissions for other pseudo-classical works followed, a Drunken Bacchus, a Kneeling Cupid, etc., works of technical skill but unworthy and without significance in the study of Michelangelo's art. It is significant of conditions then prevailing in the Vatican that it was a cardinal who bought the Cupid and a cardinal who ordered the Drunken Bacchus and who chose the subject. The disfavor with which Christian art was regarded at this time in the highest of Christian circles is noteworthy.

Slowly the artist emancipated himself from the tyranny of this misguided patronage and another cardinal was found to give him a commission on terms more consonant with his nature and with the nature of art. The result was the great Pietà now in St. Peter's, completed at the age of twenty-four, a sculptural triumph which was never surpassed. It is a work of noble seriousness and great majesty, spiritually closely akin to the youthful Madonna of the Stair already considered. If it lacks the exquisite pathos of the artist's later works and "wrings no tears from our hearts," its restrained feeling is more consonant with the passivity and decorum of the marble than would be the poignant anguish that the subject suggests.

The Pietà, that is, the mother with the dead Christ, has proved a well-nigh impossible subject for sculpture. The group simply will not "compose" properly. The spectator is not supposed to think about these problems



PIETÀ
St. Peter's, Rome

of material and process but to think only of the thought or feeling expressed. However, he will think about material and process and will have his attention distracted by them unless these problems are solved satisfactorily. The sculptor, for instance, does not wish us to think about the marble of which his statue is made but to take it for granted and pass at once to the subject that he is representing. But to make us forget the marble he must himself remember it and be careful to do nothing with it which seems incongruous with its character. If he carves a leaf too thin or indulges in slender and spreading forms he will inevitably set us thinking about the brittleness of the marble and wondering how he could carve it without breaking it. If he creates a group which seems unstable and looks as if it might tip over we recall how heavy marble is and what a crash it would make if it fell. If we do not consciously *think* about these things we have an uneasy subconscious *feeling* which somehow interferes with our direct appreciation and enjoyment of that which the artist has represented. The true artist tries to avoid these impediments to the appreciation of his subject and the ability to do so, in the form either of science or of intuition must be a part of his professional equipment.

These matters have long been made the subject of tacit agreements among artists—the so-called conventions of art—which individual artists interpret with varying strictness and which the mere craftsman sometimes ignores altogether. Thus, it is recognized that a sculptured group should be compact, should have “integrity of mass” and stability of form. The pyramid is the geometrical form which most perfectly combines compactness with stability and good group composition constantly tends to assume the pyramidal form. But

all the time the artist must remember that he is dealing with living beings and that his compositions must be consonant with their nature and with the nature of the theme.

It will be clear that the Pietà was not easy to group in this way. The corpse would naturally be extended full length. The Mother would naturally stand at one end or the other or kneel bowed over the head. Many natural arrangements are possible and many attempts have been made, none of them satisfactory to both nature and convention.

Michelangelo is clearly conscious of the difficulty and he has cut the Gordian knot with the boldness of an Alexander. The resulting group is perhaps the most perfect from the conventional standpoint in the whole history of art. It is the ideal of a sculptural pyramid, broad of base and symmetrical in its slopes but not geometrized at the cost of natural form. The group indeed is so perfect that it tempts us to forget the rather startling liberty which he has taken with the subject. Now that we think of it, it is not very plausible to have a woman, even a mother, hold the body of a full-grown man in her lap. In actual life it would be both unpleasant and ridiculous. It may be conceded at once that this was the only way in which the artist could combine these two figures in a group suited to sculpture. But why is it that he does not pay the penalty? Why is it that the arrangement which would offend us in life does not offend us here? For it does not. On this all seem to be agreed. The work is sometimes criticised as lacking the spiritual depth of Michelangelo's later work but rarely on the ground of its arrangement.

The reason is that Michelangelo, perfectly conscious of the difficulty, has used all the liberties and the

resources of art to overcome it. To begin with he has made the Christ smaller than the mother, about reversing the natural proportions. Curiously enough this is something which if cleverly done, easily passes unchallenged. Thus on the Parthenon Frieze the head of a man on horseback is on a level with that of one standing on the ground. No one seems to notice it or think of it as odd. On the contrary, if the true proportions were observed (thus spoiling the frieze as a decoration) they would think it queer and unsatisfactory. For quite analogous though different reasons Michelangelo's change of proportions in this case seems to us satisfactory and even natural.

Another device is the use of voluminous draperies for the mother, again with little regard to plausibility. In life heavy draperies do not help a person to bear burdens but in sculpture they do. We are never deceived into thinking that a statue is a live person. We know that it is stone and in the subconscious realm where our art impressions largely originate we judge of sculpture in terms of stone as well as of subject. The massive form of the heavily draped mother is completely satisfying to this subconscious mind of ours and its judgments are respected by the true artist.

The Pietà is therefore a sculptural masterpiece of a very high order and a revelation of the artist's command of the resources of his art. As such it was instantly recognized and the artist's fame was assured. It is to a less extent a revelation of his spiritual insight. As sculpture it is magnificent but as a Pietà, a portrayal of the grief that a mother under such circumstances must feel, it is inadequate. Majestic, noble, refined, wisely restrained within the limits of sculptural decorum, it does not sufficiently suggest — as it should and might

— a grief too deep for utterance, a spiritual experience beyond the resources of art. The time for that is not yet.

If the Pietà made the artist's reputation it did not at once make his fortune. Patrons were few under the pontificate of Alexander VI who cared for works of this character. Meanwhile conditions in Florence had changed. While the Pietà was in progress Savonarola had perished and the temper of Florentines was seemingly reverting to the normal. Despite Michelangelo's sympathies he could not fail to note that the outlook for employment in Florence had improved. The parental home, too, offered inexpensive asylum during a period of unemployment. Hence after a period of more or less futile waiting we find him again in Florence where he remains until recalled to Rome for another and far more momentous undertaking.

This period of some six years between the ages of twenty-four and thirty, found him busily but somewhat miscellaneously employed. The works assignable to this period are not always dated nor do we know in certain cases whether they were produced in Rome or Florence. Several are unfinished and though always significant they must of necessity engage our attention but briefly.

Perhaps the most beautiful of all is the "Madonna of Bruges," a sitting figure of the Madonna with the child leaning against her knee. In manner and spirit it is so closely akin to the Pietà as to suggest an almost contemporaneous execution. There is the same type of face, the same grave seriousness falling just short of pathos, the same draperies, the same technique. The child is exquisite in both person and posture. The mood is one better suited to the mother still happy in the possession of her child than to her mourning over his



MADONNA
Noire Dame, Bruges

tragic death. There have always been those who have seen in this exquisite work the culmination of Michelangelo's art, a judgment with which, in its pure presence, it is difficult to quarrel.

Two tondos or circular reliefs executed at this time, but left unfinished, offer interesting studies in composition and are not unworthy of the artist in conception and beauty, but they leave us in little doubt that Michelangelo preferred sculpture in the round and never executed relief from choice. Possibly their unfinished condition may be thus explained.

Closely related to these is the painted tondo, the so-called Doni Madonna, in reality a Holy Family conceived entirely as a sculptural group, compact, pyramidal, and perfectly modeled, but nowise suited to its round frame. Possibly this preceded the sculptured tondos which are successive improvements upon it as compositions for a circular frame. The Doni Madonna shows no adaptation whatever. The tondo in Florence is much better; that in London superb.

More ambitious was a contract with Cardinal Piccolomini of Siena (soon to become Pope Pius III) for fifteen statues to decorate the Library which the Cardinal was building in his native city. Four of these were completed but the work was interrupted, first, by a commission from the City of Florence and second and more permanently by the imperious call of another pope. They are the least interesting of Michelangelo's sculptures and the interruption of the work is hardly a matter of regret.

It is the two works undertaken for the City of Florence which are most widely known, though *as art* the half forgotten Madonna of Bruges is perhaps entitled to a higher rank than either.



THE DONI MADONNA
Uffizi, Florence



MADONNA
Bargello, Florence

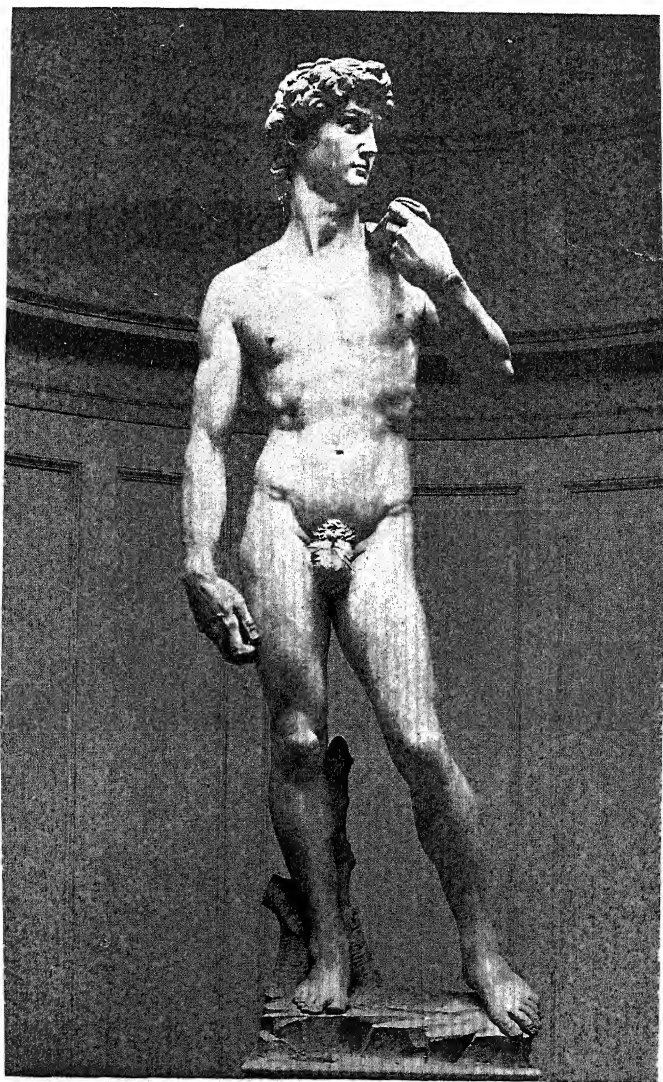


MADONNA
Burlington House, London

A huge block of marble spoiled by an earlier artist was the property of the city. Accident had made it an object of rivalry among artists. Who could utilize it to advantage? It was rather a test of cleverness than a problem of economizing a bit of waste marble. Proposals had been made and considered. Now that Michelangelo had returned with the fame of the Pietà upon him his friends sought and obtained it for him. There were apparently no restrictions as to subject or use. It was a test of skill for the erstwhile apprentice and journeyman who now returned to take his examination as master before the most critical public in Europe.

The test was admirably suited to Michelangelo. His power of visualization, if sometimes overstated, was certainly extraordinary. His own picturesque statement that he saw his angel in the stone and had but to chip away the envelope, if not to be taken too literally, essentially states the truth. This was precisely the power required to meet this test. What figure could he see hidden within this misshapen mass?

The choice of David as the subject was conventional. Almost every sculptor, soon or late, tried his hand at a David. There is no evidence that Michelangelo was specially interested in the character, one which gave him little or no opportunity to express his abiding spiritual ideals. These ideals, however, were not involved for the moment. The task was to utilize the spoiled block as completely as possible and to extract from it as large and as natural a figure as it permitted. Incidentally, it was to show to a critical community his mastery of the sculptor's technique. All this the David perfectly accomplished. The young sculptor passed his Master's examination *summa cum laude*. } The statue utilized the block completely, even showing traces of the



DAVID
Academy, Florence

earlier sculptor's chisel. It is perfectly unconstrained and natural and if there are peculiarities of proportion as is sometimes alleged they are the artists' deliberate choice and nowise the result of the block's limitations. The knowledge of the nude and the perfection of execution are beyond question. The David is his doctor's thesis. It is magnificent sculpture but indifferent art. To those who see the culmination of art in the mere representation of the human figure such a distinction may seem mystifying. Michelangelo was certainly not of that number. To him this power, now so amply demonstrated, was useful only as serving the higher purposes of spiritual expression. "There have been thousands who could successfully portray the human figure. There has been but one Michelangelo."

The David had the important result of at once securing for Michelangelo another state commission of the first importance, a vast mural decoration in the Palazzo Vecchio or City Hall in which at the age of twenty-nine he was matched against the mightiest name in art, Leonardo da Vinci, then fifty-two years of age and, at the zenith of his fame and powers. The assignment of the two walls of the palace to these two men on even terms is evidence of the impression which the David had produced. The fact that the one was a painter and the other a sculptor seems to have disturbed no one.

It is one of our great misfortunes that neither of these commissions was ever executed. Both cartoons were prepared for transfer to the walls but for different reasons this final and all-important step was never taken. The cartoons, abandoned by the artists, have completely disappeared, only partial and sketchy copies remaining to tell us of their subject and character. Michelangelo's subject, the Battle of Pisa, commemorated an insignificant

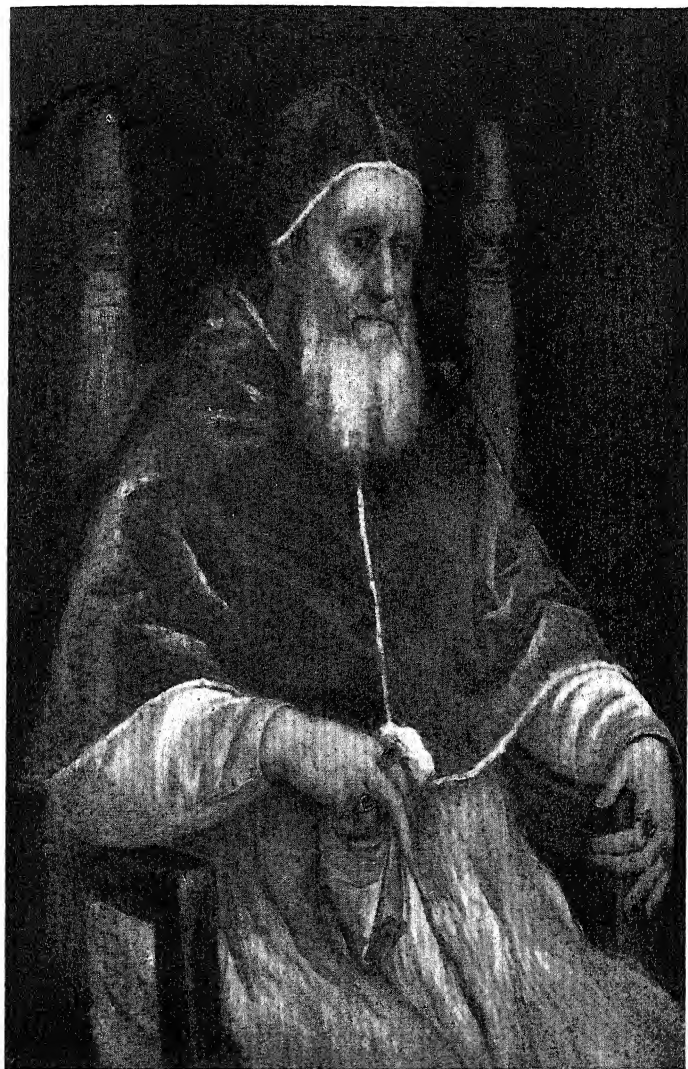


BATTLE OF PISA. (After an Engraving)

incident in the history of Florence. Though lauded to the skies by contemporary critics, it seems to have been essentially of technical interest. It had little pictorial character and consisted chiefly of an immense number of studies of the human figure in the most diverse attitudes and situations. It was the legitimate sequel of the *David* and reflects the enthusiasm of this great sculptural triumph. Though lauded to the skies by Cellini and doubtless admired by the technicians generally, the work, to judge from the imperfect copy handed down to us, was of technical rather than of general art interest. Much as we must regret its loss we may congratulate ourselves that it was this rather than another. But whatever its value as an independent work its significance as a preparation for the great work so soon to be laid upon him is beyond calculation. It was the technical preliminary for the Sistine Ceiling.

While the work upon the *David* was still in progress Cardinal Rovere, the most powerful personality of the age, ascended the Papal throne as Julius II. Destined forever to be associated with Michelangelo in the memory of mankind and to find in that association the chief of his many titles to fame, he calls for our somewhat careful attention.

A Franciscan, he was perhaps of all who ever wore the habit of the order the least like the lowly Francis. A man of volcanic passion, powerful will, and martial temper, he was a born builder of empire and ruler of men. The conversion of the papal office into a temporal rule, a policy inaugurated by his uncle, Sixtus IV, and bequeathed as the policy of this powerful family, was a task perfectly congenial to his nature and one which he carried to completion. To this end he unhesitatingly grasped the sword, made and broke alliances, subdued



JULIUS II

unwilling peoples, and inflicted with little compunction the misery which such a policy entails. His political ethics were those of this Machiavellian age. His manners were such as befitted the bluff soldier that he was. He could swear like a trooper at an offending general and beat a bishop with his staff. He had a will that brooked no opposition, a temper ever ready to overwhelm the luckless offender, and an impulsiveness which led to rash ventures and unceremonious retreats. But over and in spite of all was a truly imperial mind. Though ruthless in the pursuit of his aims he was magnanimous at heart. Furious in anger, he never nursed a grudge. Though many of his projects were left unfinished his life was one of magnificent achievement. Above all he had the greatness to tolerate greatness in others and to enlist it in his service. He never surrounded himself with little and subservient men. Viewed in true perspective Julius is the most picturesque and the most dynamic figure of his age.

After some months of housecleaning and getting settled Julius felt free to turn to the creative program which he had long had in mind. It was characteristic of the Renaissance and of papal humanism that one of the first of his projects was the erection of his tomb in St. Peters. He now bethought himself of the sculptor of the Pietà, an inevitable choice under the circumstances but above all to one of the temperament of Julius. Unknown to either, two spirits of titanic mould and closest kinship had found each other.

Just before his thirtieth birthday Michelangelo was summoned to Rome. The *David* was completed. The cartoons for the Battle of Pisa were ready to be transferred to the wall. We are tempted to regret the incontinence of both Pope and artist which denied to this

great work the brief time needed for its completion. But who knows? Julius' time was short. Even as it was his one great commission to the artist was barely finished in the allotted time. Had it been obliged to wait for the completion of the earlier work it would have outlived its sponsor and perished at the hands of his unsympathetic successors.

Michelangelo responded to the call with an enthusiasm which he had never known and which he was perhaps never to know again. Informed of the nature of the proposed undertaking he rushed away and prepared a plan which, had it been carried out, would undoubtedly have surpassed all known works of its kind. There followed the enthusiastic acceptance of the plan, the *carte blanche* for the quarrying of the marble, the long months spent in Carrara at this arduous undertaking, the return to Rome with genius straining at the leash, the brief basking in papal favor, a perilous intimacy with greatness, then reaction and estrangement, and finally the crushing discovery that, for reasons never satisfactorily explained, the Pope had decided to postpone, perhaps to abandon the undertaking. Infuriated, humiliated, and profoundly discouraged, Michelangelo left Rome resolved never to return.

It was now the Pope who was in consternation. Despite his irritation and his rude treatment of the artist it was farthest from his thoughts to lose his services. A peremptory command to return was ignored and likewise a second, this time backed up with a demand upon the government of Florence to return the offending artist under pain of his most serious displeasure. The Pope had met his match in passion and will. From April to December the summons remained unheeded despite Florentine anxieties and admonitions.

Then at last in the midst of that winter campaign against Bologna which had brought Julius through Tuscany and across the Apennines the two men met again.

The meeting is scantily recorded but of appealing interest. The Pope relieved his feelings by chiding Michelangelo for failing to return until he had to come and fetch him. The situation was embarrassing. The bishop of Bologna, Michelangelo's friend and former patron, thought to relieve the embarrassment by making excuses for him as merely an artist and therefore not to be taken seriously. The relief came in an altogether unexpected way. The Pope turned on him savagely, rebuking him for saying of Michelangelo things that he himself would not have ventured to say. The tension thus relieved he dismissed the Bishop in confusion. With this remarkable if somewhat indirect testimonial of his regard for the artist the Pope seems to have felt that adequate amends had been made for his former ill treatment of him and the incident was regarded as closed.

It may be doubted whether Michelangelo so considered it. The work upon the Tomb, so unceremoniously and rudely interrupted, was not yet to be resumed. Things had happened in the interval and the tireless imagination of the Pope had produced new projects. Bologna had been conquered and added to the Papal States and the Pope conceived of a colossal bronze statue of himself as the fitting monument to commemorate this event in the conquered city. Upon this the artist reluctantly spent the next fifteen months, only to have his one portrait statue perish soon after in an uprising of the unreconciled Bolognese.

Speculation has been rife as to the character and value of this statue. There is little to satisfy our curiosity.

Michelangelo himself never commented upon its loss or expressed particular interest in it. He is known to have accepted the commission unwillingly but perhaps not more so than in the case of the Sistine. He was not interested in portrait and disparaged it as a subject for art. Neither fact gives ground for decisive judgment. The one certain thing is that Michelangelo was the only artist who should have made a portrait of Julius and that Julius was the only man of whom Michelangelo should have made a portrait. Fate has willed that the old titan should be known to us instead through the portrait of the gentle Raphael, an admirable portrait but still a Raphael. Passion slumbers; the volcano is at rest. The choice is wise for a Raphael, wise, perhaps, for the static arts in general. And yet, when in the great chapel we gaze at the Creator as he hurls the sun into the heavens we cannot help thinking what that more understanding spirit might have told us.

Upon the completion of the statue Michelangelo returned to Florence, whether with the intention of resuming his work there we do not know. In any case the work was not resumed. The cartoons for the Battle of Pisa were left to gather dust in the great hall of the Palazzo Vecchio until, made precious by the artist's growing fame, they were cut up and appropriated by art students as souvenirs. There was the contract with the preceding Pope to deliver fifteen statues for the decoration of his library in Siena, only four of which had been delivered. There were other things begun and unfinished. But Julius wanted him and with his usual ruthlessness the Pope did not allow contracts with dead men to stand in his way. The precedent established was one which his successors were not slow to follow later to his own disadvantage. What Michelangelo

thought of it we do not know. Much had happened since he left Florence a brief eighteen months before. Broader vistas had opened, and now that opportunity so greatly beckoned he may well have lost interest in these earlier projects. He now enjoyed the favor of the greatest of earthly patrons, the most stimulating of living personalities. What possibilities in the favor of this patron whose powerful will and creative imagination were backed by his seemingly unlimited resources! And more potent than all other attractions was the vision that never left him, that never lost interest, the vision that was with him now as a hope and later as a tragic memory. For the project of the Tomb had been "postponed" and he was encouraged to expect that ere long it would be resumed. Soon, but not now. Pleas and protests were unavailing. He must first "repair" the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM

Michelangelo's reluctance to undertake the commission is well known. For this there were two very different reasons. The first was his desire to continue work upon the Tomb, a desire which made him unwilling to undertake this commission or any other until that was finished. This desire remained with him through long years and was urged at every opportunity until the last vestige of hope disappeared. There can be no doubt that his consent to return to Rome, leaving his Florentine projects uncompleted, had been secured in part by the assurance that the work on the Tomb would be resumed at an early date. It may be assumed, too, that this was the Pope's expectation. But for the present his request was again refused, we do not know for what reasons. Michelangelo, always prone to suspicion, believed it due to the machinations of his enemies, particularly of Bramante, the cleverest and most unscrupulous of his rivals. He was the moving spirit in a clique hostile to Michelangelo and committed, partly for reasons of policy, to the interests of Raphael. The Pope's health was failing and he was said to have been persuaded that it was of evil omen to build his own tomb. There can be no doubt of Bramante's hostility and his willingness to checkmate Michelangelo in his great undertakings. That he should have taken this means is nowise improbable. But there is no lack of other and better reasons for the Pope's decision. The project was an enormous one and Julius had gone far enough with it to discover that it would be a heavy

burden upon his finances. This difficulty was greatly increased by his decision, motivated, it is said, by the demands of the Tomb itself, to rebuild St. Peter's, a task which was to last a hundred and fifty years and well nigh to bankrupt the Papacy. Worst of all, his state-building policy had involved him in unexpected wars, and then as now wars were costly. In a word he had decided that he could not afford such a tomb. Whether, as one writer surmises, he had begun to see in the new St. Peter's his monument and so lost interest in the tomb we do not know. No such assumption is needed to explain what happened. The project was postponed; later it was revised and reduced; it finally ended in pitiful fiasco.

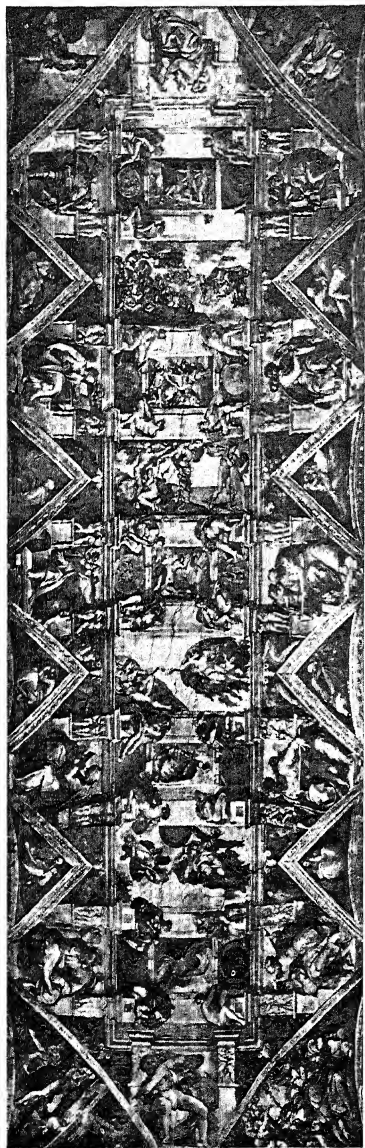
/ Michelangelo's second objection was more fundamental and had to do with the nature of the proposed undertaking. 'He declared that he was not a painter, that he did not know how to paint, and that he did not wish to learn the art. He could have proved this by documentary evidence. His few attempts at painting had shown him to be an artist of uncommon ability but not a *painter*.¹ His Doni Madonna, recently executed during his last stay in Florence, has been praised as an admirable composition. It is an admirable *sculptural* composition. If properly executed in large scale and suitably placed it would be a worthy companion to the great Pietà. But it is crude in color and the beautiful pyramidal group conforming so admirably to the repose that sculpture demands does not conform in the least to the circular frame which, as a painter, it was incumbent on him to consider. He seems to have realized this and to have met the demand of the frame in a helpless way by padding out the picture with random and irrelevant figures.

Not less ominous was the Battle of Pisa, extravagantly praised by Cellini (a sculptor, be it remembered) but wholly lacking in the essentials of painting. We know it only through an imperfect copy which certainly does not do it justice but which just as certainly reveals its lack of the sense of space, of the environment of color, light, and shade so essential to painting.

The fact is that Michelangelo, like the Florentines generally conceived of painting as a form of sculpture, a study of form rather than of color. The human figure was the one worthy subject of either art. For the representation of the human figure, its attitude, action, and emotion, form was everything. Light and shadow served for modeling the figure, not for the mysteries of space, the magic of environment. The Battle of Pisa is a group of statues seen in vacuo.

As thus conceived there could be no question that sculpture was the nobler art. Its forms were real; those of painting were only seeming. Painting was therefore a sham art, a cheap way of getting the effect of sculpture. Only slowly did men come to realize that this whole conception of painting was wrong, that painting was an interpretation of nature through color rather than through form, and that light and shadow have a mystery and a magic all their own. They thus have a significance in art which is quite independent of their service in revealing the shapes of things. Still later came the realization that painting as thus defined has a far wider range of subject than sculpture, a range in which the human figure is but one interest among many. Sculpturesque painting, to be sure, is sham sculpture, but no more than pictorial sculpture is sham painting. This Michelangelo had to learn.

Had he learned it, however, there were still grave



SISTINE CEILING
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

reasons why he should hesitate to undertake the work. It was a commission of enormous difficulty, perhaps the most difficult ever undertaken by a painter. The first difficulty was its size and shape. The area covered has possibly been exceeded, though rarely and never under such conditions. The vault, if flattened out, would make a huge rectangle some sixty feet wide and a hundred and fifty feet long. The cross vaults over the windows, however, intersecting with the main vault, cut deep, pointed notches into this rectangle leaving blunted sawtooth projections along its entire margin. The triangles of the cross vaults had, of course, to be treated as separate units and the sawtooth projections between them invited the same treatment. These being disposed of, there remained an enormous strip or central band half as wide as the chapel which according to the decorative canons of the period must be filled with picture compositions. This was quite too large to handle as a unit and yet it did not lend itself to natural division. The mere plotting out of the work was a matter of the greatest difficulty where only the most experienced might hope to succeed.

Another difficulty was the varying incline of the surface. The vault was neither horizontal nor upright but at every angle in between. A few years earlier this would not have been regarded as a serious matter. Walls, horizontal, upright, or inclined, were treated alike as though they were upright. The natural posture of the figure was left to the imagination.

But the Renaissance with all its idealism was intensely naturalistic and the artists strove constantly against every unnaturalness which did not serve ideal ends. To have a standing figure lean forward on an inclined wall was obviously unnatural. Hence it happened that

about the time of Michelangelo's birth a brilliant artist, Melozzo da Forlì, introduced what we may call corrective foreshortening to overcome this difficulty. He seems to have argued that since a painter by means of foreshortening on a perpendicular wall could make a figure lean backward, then on a wall that leaned forward he could, by foreshortening, make a figure stand erect. This new technique he illustrated with startling effect in the dome of a church in Rome (since destroyed). The innovation was welcomed with enthusiasm and henceforth corrective foreshortening was regarded as essential for decorations on vaults and domes. That this new method played havoc with the walls and domes as regards their visual integrity did not trouble the painters of the sixteenth century. They became infatuated with the new principle and carried it to absurd lengths, even to the extent of representing upright figures directly overhead with the inevitable result of dangling legs and unseemly postures. But these excesses had not yet bred reaction and it was recognized at once that the great vault of the Chapel would involve a very large and difficult application of the new principle.

Finally, there was the difficulty of *fréscó*, a method of painting involving technical processes of much complexity. *Fresco*, as the term implies, is painting upon fresh plaster during the process of crystalization commonly called drying. It must be done rapidly and unerringly, for the plaster is right for painting only for a brief period and the color once applied can be changed only by scraping off the plaster, replastering and repainting. The picture must therefore be begun and finished at one brief sitting with only the slightest touches of dry painting afterward. Obviously, good *fresco* requires a definiteness of concept and a sureness

of touch which are usually acquired only by long experience.

To meet these difficult requirements a somewhat complicated process is adopted consisting of several stages. There is first, the sketch, usually slight and in small scale, the purpose of which is to determine the composition or arrangement for the space in question. No attempt is made at accuracy or completeness of detail and in subsequent stages the artist seldom adheres closely to the sketch and may even seem to disregard it altogether.

The second stage is the cartoon, a full size drawing complete in every detail save color. For large compositions this is made in sections on separate pieces of paper. The drawing completed, the outlines are perforated like the lines of an embroidery pattern for transfer to the fabric. It was in this stage that Michelangelo left his *Battle of Pisa*.

Finally comes the painting. The space to be covered at one sitting having been decided upon, usually a small space, perhaps enough for only part of a figure or merely a head, it is covered with a thin coat of fresh plaster which is allowed to acquire the necessary firmness. Then that section of the cartoon is held up in place and pounced on with something like a blueing bag leaving rows of dots to indicate the necessary lines. Guided by these dots — for even the most assured draughtsman dare not work on fresh plaster without them — the painter now puts in the outlines and fills in details and color, bringing this section — perhaps a head, an arm, or a leg — to completion before he leaves his work. The next day he covers another section and so on until his figure and his picture are complete.

It will be seen at once that this is entirely different

from ordinary painting in which the painter begins by painting his ground, then when it has hardened, outlines his figures and adds details, steps back and studies the result, returns to add, to change, to efface, to repaint, until after months or even years the work is complete. How different this lightning, piecemeal work in its requirements both of talent and preparation!

And this commission, perhaps the largest, the most complicated, and technically difficult ever undertaken by a painter, is offered to a man of thirty-three who had never worked in fresco, who had seldom painted and then not with entire success, who was not, and did not wish to be, a painter, and whose interest was passionately centered in another undertaking. His insistence that he did not understand fresco painting was neither ill temper nor affectation but a plain statement of fact fully corroborated by his first attempts in the Chapel itself. He had learned all he knew of fresco at the age of fourteen during his fitful and unsympathetic apprenticeship to Ghirlandajo. If he assisted Ghirlandajo in fresco at this time it can hardly have been in more than a menial capacity. With all his self-assurance as a born artist the proposal of the Pope may well have filled him with consternation. The almost miraculous outcome must not blind us to the amazing recklessness of the Pope's proposal.

To these difficulties which inhere in the nature of the undertaking was added another which, though extrinsic, proved a serious handicap. This was the unfortunate relation between Michelangelo and the other aspirants to papal favor, notably Bramante, the great architect whose influence with the Pope was perhaps greater than that of any other in court circles. Allusion has been made to the hostility of Bramante and to the adroitness

with which he sought to undermine Michelangelo's standing with the Pope. Michelangelo, always a prey to suspicion, doubtless exaggerated this hostility, even suspecting Bramante of designs upon his life. Such fears were probably unwarranted but to one who recalls the crimes of a bravo like Cellini they will not seem unreasonable. That Bramante who had the ear of the Pope used his influence against Michelangelo and in favor of Raphael and others of his friends and intimates seems reasonably certain, but he relied upon weapons more subtle than those of Cellini. It is commonly believed that it was he who urged this dangerous commission for Michelangelo, feeling confident that as sculptor he would lack the necessary knowledge of perspective, foreshortening, and fresco technique and that his failure would insure his disgrace with Julius. The facts seem to be, however, that the idea originated with the Pope and that Bramante tried to dissuade him from it, asserting that Michelangelo was certain to fail. Such counsel from an expert would not necessarily imply hostility, though Michelangelo inevitably so construed it and in this case with reason. Even after the work was half done and the artist's ability was no longer in doubt Bramante's influence seems still to have been exerted to prevent the completion of the work by Michelangelo. If we are inclined to judge harshly this pettiness on the part of Bramante we must in fairness recognize that his hostility was not unprovoked and that Michelangelo did not always give the soft answer that turneth away wrath. Wholly lacking the suavity of Raphael, passionate and sensitive beyond the measure of ordinary men, the very qualities that made him the supreme interpreter of the things of the spirit unfitted him to make his way serenely through this maze of jealousy, intrigue,

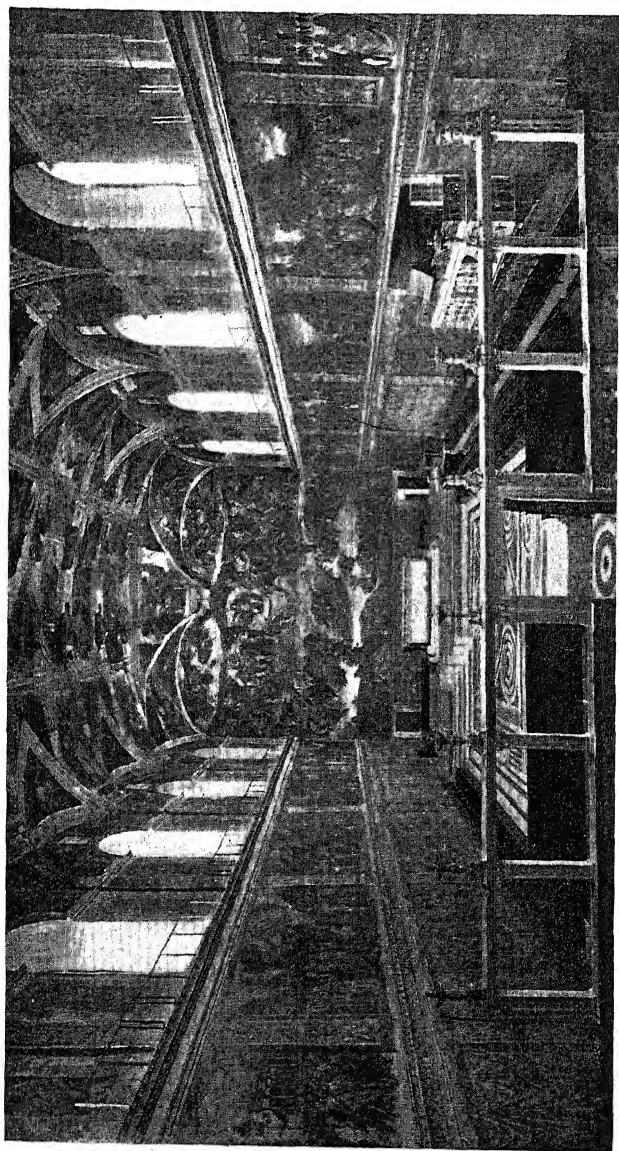
and crime where the lesser artist moved with unbroken serenity. From the dangers that threatened him and his great work he was saved only by the persistent favor of the tempestuous and capricious but ever loyal Julius.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHAPEL

The Sistine Chapel takes its name from Pope Sixtus IV (Italian, *Sisto*) the uncle of Julius, who built it in 1473-1481 as a part of the grandiose scheme of state building and papal aggrandizement which his nephew, after an interval of some years, was to revive and carry to relative completion. It is the Papal Chapel of the Vatican, and is reserved for important functions not of a public character, the election of a Pope, the creation of cardinals, etc. It is rectangular in shape, long, narrow, and enormously high. The walls, perfectly plain, rise to a height of some fifty feet without a break save for the necessary entrances only one of which is of any size or dignity. Perched higher up, like the windows of a Gothic clerestory, are the plain, round topped windows which light the interior. Whether this arrangement was intentional, perhaps to guard the privacy of the Vatican conclaves is not clear. The fact that the Chapel is well nigh surrounded by other apartments of the Vatican may account for this peculiar feature.

The Chapel is covered with a simple barrel vault, that is, a vault shaped like a half cylinder though somewhat flatter, whose edges rest upon the side walls. The ends of the vault are rounded off to match the slope of the sides. The windows, however, are set so high that they cut into the vault and hence are covered with small cross vaults which unite with the main vault in V shaped intersections.



SISTINE CHAPEL
Vatican, Rome

The Chapel is not an architectural triumph. It is badly proportioned, its walls bare and featureless, and its ceiling structurally commonplace and unbeautiful. It is poorly adapted to decoration yet dependent upon it for any charm it may possess. Its vast spaces can be treated only by being arbitrarily cut up into sections which have little relation to structure and contribute little to its interpretation. It is true that the Italian painters of the period were little given to interpretive decoration and so were not averse to plain spaces on which they could depict their ambitious panoramic compositions quite untrammelled by architectural considerations. Even so, however, the Chapel cannot be said to have offered them a favorable opportunity. If they triumphed it was against odds. Nor need we judge them too harshly if they sacrificed the architecture to their painting. It was the lesser interest.

The Chapel seems to have been carried to completion by Sixtus, even the decoration having been pushed with energy. The walls for near half their height were covered with a conventional pattern over which were hung later Raphael's tapestries on ceremonial occasions. Above this, just beneath the windows, is a broad band of fresco perhaps twenty feet wide and originally running completely around the Chapel. This band is divided into convenient sections for individual pictures, six on each side and, originally, two on each end. (The two at the west end were destroyed in 1535 to make way for Michelangelo's Last Judgment and the two at the east end were replaced later by more modern works.) The individual frescoes along the sides were executed in the years 1481-1483 by the ablest Florentine and Umbrian artists of the period, the men in whom the art of Florence and Umbria, strictly so called, reached

its culmination. The list includes Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, and Cosimo Roselli for Florence, and Perugino, Pinturicchio, and Signorelli for Umbria, names without a rival in this last quarter of the fifteenth century. They are here, too, at their best, taken as a whole. Botticelli in particular, perhaps the truest artist of them all, shows not only his usual poetry of line and mastery of pictorial detail but a power of character delineation and a comprehension of race types which he never surpassed. It is a strange chance which has placed here within the limits of a single room the crowning achievements of two centuries, so related and yet so alien, so near and yet a world apart. Upon these walls we have the finished art of two Italian schools, the product of stimulating but narrow environments. These men are able craftsmen and masters of accepted convention. They have judgment, taste, poetry, imagination. They are loyal to art tradition without being enslaved by it. Their work is decorous, pleasing, and intelligible to their public who recognize in it the adequate expression of their own ideals. The themes are familiar and the treatment eminently painstaking and correct. We are nowhere offended but neither are we thrilled. Nothing here rolls back the curtain that hides the infinite. Little did the complacent Ghirlandajo or the sensitive Botticelli realize as they contemplated their admirable work in the year 1483 that an uncouth eight-year-old in an obscure home in Florence was to open the heavens above them and reveal to a startled world forms of undreamed power and majesty.

Although the Chapel offers an ideal opportunity to compare the art of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the art of Florence in its mature but provincial character and that world art of boundless horizon to

which it gave birth, it may be doubted whether one visitor in a thousand ever seriously compares them. Even those specially interested in comparing the two periods will the more often choose other examples and compare under other conditions. The reason is not far to seek. The power of the later work to command attention, to take possession of the spectator to the exclusion of all else, is in itself a measure of the two and makes other comparison as superfluous as it is impossible. Placed anywhere else these frescoes of Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, Perugino, would command attention and elicit praise. In the Chapel they simply do not exist. A hurried and not too sympathetic glance is usually the utmost tribute. It is better so. Whatever their value in and of themselves, they are a loss rather than a gain if they distract our attention in this place of supreme reverence.

Above the band of fresco which we have been considering is the window zone with narrow spaces between the windows which called for some kind of decoration. These spaces had received from the same or contemporary painters large scale figures of the Popes, a commonplace but perhaps inevitable choice. These figures did not offer an opportunity congenial to the panoramic painters of the period if we may judge by the result. Yet the possibility of giving to the colossal figure both dignity and meaning was soon to be demonstrated.

There still remained upon the side walls the little half circles in the cross vaults over the windows. We do not know whether these were included in the earlier scheme of decoration or not. All we know is that they were ultimately included in Michelangelo's scheme of decoration for the Ceiling, whether as a part of the original commission or an afterthought is not clear.

With regard to the Ceiling itself on the eve of Michelangelo's great undertaking we have no definite information. There is an allusion to the "repairing" of the ceiling by Michelangelo which would seem to imply an earlier decoration destroyed to make way for that of Michelangelo. Such a proceeding would have been quite in keeping with the temper of Julius and the practice of the times. Raphael did the same thing in the Stanze with the Pope's authorization, an authorization of which he hesitated to take full advantage, while the demolition of the old St. Peters by Bramante, a demolition in which the tombs of venerated Popes and Emperors were cast out as rubbish, awakened protest even in that ruthless age.

Nor is there any reason to doubt that Michelangelo would have interpreted a commission to "repair" the ceiling in this liberal sense. To those who know the art of Michelangelo it is unthinkable that he should have completed work begun by another or repaired damage in another artist's work. It was not that he would not; he could not. No possible deference for the work of another — such deference, for instance, as he showed for the work of Ghiberti — would have enabled him to assimilate his manner to that of another without glaring incongruity.

There are other reasons, however, for doubting the existence of an earlier decoration. Such a decoration can have been executed only by the eminent painters whose work we have seen upon the walls. There were no others of equal ability at the time and the Pope can hardly have entrusted the all important ceiling to inferior men. We may safely assume that the painters who were busy upon the wall frescoes during the years 1481-1483 were entrusted with the entire scheme of

decoration for the Chapel including the Ceiling. That they were competent, according to the standards of the age, for even so difficult a task as this is beyond doubt. Such undertakings were not new. Since the days of Cimabue and Giotto the decoration of great and complicated vaults had been successfully undertaken and by none more successfully in these latter days than by Perugino whose ceiling in the near by Sala del Incendio Raphael had refused to destroy to make way for his own even when authorized to do so. We may assume therefore that the Ceiling was included in their commission and that it was not completed, probably not begun, because the work was interrupted by the death of Pope Sixtus in 1484. Popes at that time were usually chosen from powerful families and their undertakings were associated quite as much with the family fortunes as with those of the Papacy. Hence it was that the new Pope usually had new projects and was little interested in those of his predecessor. So the great Chapel, a monument to the Rovere family to which Pope Sixtus belonged, remained unfinished, the great vault covered with coarse plaster, until twenty years after, when those who had begun the work were scattered or dead, another Rovere, Julius II, resumed the project of his house.

Such was the Chapel at the time of the great commission, a new and imposing building and a monument to that art which gave distinction to one of the greatest centuries in history. It was no choice of the artist nor yet any fitness of the building that made the Sistine Chapel the supreme monument of the Renaissance. It chanced that within its walls two personalities of unusual type, of more than human passion, energy, and creative impulse, had met and had recognized, each in

the other, his complement, his opportunity, his destiny. Impelled by a common need of utterance and fused in a common purpose, these elemental natures moved to their goal.

CHAPTER V

PAINTING

Agreement having been reached, Michelangelo went at the work with his usual — and somewhat more than his usual — energy, for he had the hope and probably the assurance of the Pope that when this task was completed the work on the Tomb might be resumed. This commission was therefore a thing to be gotten out of the way in the interest of the real undertaking.

For some months he was busy with the preliminaries. There was the planning of the decoration, the division of the space, the making of the sketches, and the preparation of the cartoons. This work was doubtless done in a studio where light and mechanical conditions were more favorable than in the Chapel.

Meanwhile there were other preparations to be made in the Chapel itself. A scaffolding was required and Michelangelo requested that it be constructed during the preparation of the cartoons. The Pope commissioned Bramante to erect the scaffolding, a slightly malicious commission, it would seem, to the greatest architect of the age and one whose hostility to the painter was well known. Was this the Pope's answer to Bramante's criticism of Michelangelo? Perhaps not, but there must have been those who saw the humor of the situation. The task was in fact one of considerable engineering difficulty for it seems to have been necessary so to construct the scaffolding that it would not prevent the use of the Chapel. As the Ceiling was more than eighty

feet above the pavement a scaffolding constructed in the ordinary way would have filled the whole interior with a forest of braces and upright supports. To avoid this Bramante constructed a scaffolding suspended from above by ropes attached to the timbers of the roof. These ropes, of course, passed through the Ceiling.

The scaffolding completed and submitted to Michelangelo's inspection, he at once declared that he could not paint a ceiling with holes through it. When Bramante declared that there was no other way to meet the requirements Michelangelo undertook the task himself. His solution of the problem showed him to be not only an artist but an engineer. The Ceiling being concave the scaffolding had necessarily to be convex above to match the concavity of the Ceiling. Michelangelo perceived that a scaffolding built in this shape would tend to sag in the center from its own weight and that this sag would be transmitted as lateral pressure against the walls thus wedging the scaffolding tightly between the walls and supporting its weight in that way without intermediate supports. This seems to have been a real contribution of permanent value to engineering science, a principle unknown before but in regular use since. Meanwhile the vast amount of cordage used by Bramante lay piled below and neglected after the wasteful fashion of the time until the custodian of the Chapel appropriated it and sold it for so large a sum that he was enabled to dower his daughter and marry her far above her station.

Michelangelo's division or layout of the Ceiling involved a large amount of architectural and conventional detail the execution of which in works of this kind is usually left to helpers or artists of lesser attainments. In this, the largest work of its kind, such a co-operation

was appropriate and necessary, especially in view of Michelangelo's desire to get through with the work seconded by the ever incontinent haste of the Pope. The use of helpers was attempted at the outset, Michelangelo being apparently unconscious as yet of his temperamental incapacity for such collaboration. The work of these helpers, however, failed to satisfy him and after repeated attempts they were dismissed, the work done was effaced and Michelangelo against all precedent assumed the task of completing the entire work unaided, even to the extent, we are told, of doing his own plastering and grinding his own colors. This extravagant independence and self sufficiency has been discredited as both unreasonable and impossible, but it seems quite consonant with his practice as a sculptor of making his own cold chisels, no smith being able to temper them to his satisfaction. Whether he performed these menial services for himself or not this discharge of assistant painters added materially to the magnitude of the task and to the marvel of its rapid completion. When we remember that it covers an area of ten thousand square feet and that the painting of a single face was usually regarded as a fair day's work we get an idea of what it meant to complete the work unaided in less than four years.

There were other handicaps and disappointments in store for the painter. His own work at first turned out badly, gathering mould before it dried. Michelangelo who, it must be remembered, knew nothing of fresco except what he had learned as a boy helper to Ghirlandajo, was now more than ever convinced that he could not do the work and again asked the Pope to release him from the task. The Pope refused. One is at a loss which to admire most in the stubborn old pontiff, the

persistence with which he held his favorite artist to his task or the recklessness with which he ignored these difficulties. Did he really have the insight to see capacities as yet unrevealed to others and even to the artist himself, or was he blind to the most elementary requirements of art?

The solution was to send to Florence for an expert who could tell him what the matter was. He pronounced the difficulty to be a simple one. The plaster had been applied too wet and so required too much time to dry, giving opportunity for the mould to develop. The mistake corrected, the work proceeded without further incident.

It cannot escape our attention, however, that this dissatisfaction of the artist with his task, a dissatisfaction evident throughout, was most unfavorable to its success. He resisted the appointment to the limit before undertaking it, begged to be relieved while the work was in progress, and pronounced it a frivolous work when finished. Not in such a mood does the artist usually achieve his triumphs.

The attitude of the Pope, too, left much to be desired. During his campaigns and other distant enterprises he was away from Rome for long periods and careless of his interests and obligations there. No provision for regular payment seems to have been made and Michelangelo, being at serious expense for the work and ever pressed by his importunate family in Florence, was at times driven to desperation. At one time he writes of having received nothing for over a year and being at the end of his resources. Again he drops his work and journeys three hundred miles to Bologna to secure the necessary funds. Such a journey meant an interruption of the work for weeks. Michelangelo has been criticised

for his importunities to the Pope for funds and we may well imagine that Julius found him at times tactless and irritating. But what of the Pope who could absent himself for months without making provision for work in progress? Each had much to put up with in the other and fortunately, despite frequent outbreaks, the patience of each proved equal to the demand. The work went on at record pace and its completion found them friends.

If Julius retarded the work during his absence he made up for it on his return by crowding it with inconsiderate pressure. He seems to have had no conception of the labor involved in such a task. The speed which has seemed a marvel to all subsequent observers, seemed to Julius inadequate. This was partly his temperament. Impulsive and of extraordinary energy the world seemed too slow for him. But there was another reason which must appeal more to our sympathy. He was stricken with a malady which became chronic and ultimately proved mortal. Meanwhile, with all their friction and occasional exasperation the two men were being drawn into closer sympathy. If they angered each other they understood each other. Though unable to get along with each other they were still less able to get along without each other, a relation not so uncommon in our world as it might seem. In these circumstances the Pope became increasingly anxious for the completion of the work. Should he perhaps die and never see this chief glory of his pontificate, this work of the one artist who spoke the language of his own spirit? His solicitude was not unworthy.

The result was to increase his pressure upon the hard working artist. Ever and anon came the queries: When would he be done? Might he not see the portion already

completed, the portion now in hand? These questions from any patron would be embarrassing and from a patron like Julius who was an autocrat by temperament as well as by office they were little less than commands. On the other hand Michelangelo had in a high degree the instinct of the creative artist who withholds his work until its meaning is fully expressed. And then, who knew what questions such a visitor might ask, what suggestions of change he might make, suggestions which from such a source could not be lightly ignored? It must not be. The Pope must wait. Yet wait he would not. Ill and slowly dying, he could not. The fencing went on. Hints were unnoticed, questions parried. Then the impatient Pope concluded to exercise his prerogative. Why ask the painter's permission? Who should enter the Sistine Chapel if not the Pope? So one day as Michelangelo sat on a plank, his legs dangling below, he heard footsteps on the echoing pavement and looking down saw the Pope approaching and gazing aloft. Remonstrance was of course impossible, but as the Pope drew near a plank accidentally fell from the staging and thundered upon the pavement below. The Pope thought better of the adventure and retired.

When it became known, however, that the first half of the work — presumably the central band or zone running the length of the Chapel — was completed the Pope's impatience no longer brooked restraint and he commanded that the scaffolding be removed and the completed work exposed to view. Despite the enormous labor involved and the serious interruption of the work the scaffolding was removed and the Pope, followed by his brilliant train entered and gazed upon the wonderful panels which ever since have held the world in awe.

If the enemies of Michelangelo ever cherished the hope that he would prove unequal to the task and so eliminate himself as an obstacle to their ambitions they were quickly disillusioned. They had doubted his ability to foreshorten but they now gazed upon the most stupendous triumph of foreshortening in the history of art. They had doubted his knowledge of fresco but they beheld the most masterly frescoes in Italy. In particular they had awaited with ungenerous hopes the judgment of the Pope. They had not long to wait. Can we not imagine the feelings of the stern old pontiff as he gazed upon the Creator hurling the sun into space? Here at last was a God for a Julius. His approval was neither doubtful nor concealed. The others followed suit, prudently if not willingly, in a chorus of approval. In a later age dominated by other ideals the work has not escaped criticism but in that age and above all in the presence of that Pope, criticism was impossible.

Nor was the chorus of praise lacking in sincerity and sincere appreciation. There were generous spirits among them and for a moment even envy hid its head. Raphael with a depth of feeling that was foreign to his placid nature thanked God that he had lived to see that day. That his approval was sincere is evidenced by his persistent if not always judicious effort to follow in the footsteps of the one who had attained such heights. Nor was he alone in this homage of imitation. For a century and more, dating from that very day, Michelangelo becomes the dominant influence on the Renaissance. It was a flattering but a regrettable tribute, for alas, there can be no greater mistake than to imitate the inimitable.

That the approval was not wholly generous, however, is evidenced by the renewed attempt at this time to

displace Michelangelo and to secure for Raphael the balance of the commission. The mere thought of such a disaster makes us shudder. The disaster would have been two-fold. It would have ruined the Ceiling and it would have ruined Raphael. It would have cost us the Sibyls and the Prophets and all the marvelous paintings of the window vaults and lunettes in which the technical power and perhaps the inspiration of Michelangelo reached its highest level. This is the greater half of the Sistine Ceiling. And just as certainly it would have spelled the doom of Raphael. We have seen that he was fascinated with Michelangelo's work and that he began forthwith to imitate the colossal figures and dramatic themes which the great Florentine had informed with his somber spirit. These imitations are one and all pitiful failures. One has but to compare the beefy nude and the inanely gesticulating madonna-faced women of the *Incendio* a few yards away with the figures of the Sistine which inspired them to see the depth of the abyss into which genius can fall when it follows the path of imitation. Raphael's Sibyls in *Santa Maria della Pace* inspired by Michelangelo's later creation are hardly less emphatic. What, then, would have been the result if these meaningless and vapid imitations had been placed alongside the figures of Michelangelo? The contrast would have been unfortunate enough had Raphael been there in true character as in the *School of Athens*, the *Parnassus*, or the *Disputa*, beautiful things if taken by themselves — but as imitator of a man totally unlike himself, infinitely dynamic and potent in his appeal, the comparison would have been tragic. From this disaster a kind providence and a stubborn Pope have mercifully delivered him — and us.

Yet the proposal was not unpalatable at the time.

For such pictorial representations as Michelangelo had placed in the central space the Ceiling offered no more opportunity. The remaining spaces were irregular and little suited to pictorial compositions. Michelangelo had achieved an unquestioned, an astounding success, but he had chosen the most available spaces. What kind of pictures would he put in these less eligible, these more difficult spaces? His nature was imperious, not supple and adaptable. Might he not end in anti-climax and spoil a perfect thing?

Meanwhile Raphael was the acknowledged master of composition for difficult spaces. You could not give him a space so awkward, so unsuited to pictorial representation, that he would not compose for it not only a picture of the proper shape but one so natural, so spontaneous, that it seemed as if the space had to be made to fit the picture. How appropriate to confide to him this difficult task!

The proposal met the most strenuous resistance. Michelangelo reminded the Pope that he had accepted the commission sorely against his will but having begun the work he insisted upon being allowed to carry it to completion. The Pope, too, who had possibly been influenced by disingenuous suggestion to award the commission was not to be moved to withdraw it. He had found his man and he declared that while he sat in the chair of St. Peter no hand but Michelangelo's should touch the Sistine Ceiling. To our everlasting gain he was privileged to sit there just about long enough.

So the great scaffolding went back and Michelangelo again climbed the ladder and went back to the seat on the plank which he had left nearly a year before. The long interruption of the work had not been without its compensations. It was a very different painter in the

eyes of the world who now resumed the herculean task. The half finished work had wrought its spell, cavil and doubt had ceased, and the artist, if not more loved, was held in that awe which his name has ever since inspired in the minds of men.

Particularly gratifying now was the changed attitude of the Pope. Assured of his sympathy and understanding, the artist seems to have laid aside his jealous secretiveness and to have admitted the Pope to his confidence. There was no evasion now, no falling plank to warn away the intruder. Nor was there longer any danger of unwelcome criticism or unintelligent interference. Not infrequently the Pope mounted the staging and watched the painter at his work.

But no admission to the painter's confidence or views behind the scenes taught the fiery pontiff patience or satisfied his desire to see the finished work. Ever and anon he asked the painter when he would have done with the work. The artist, working at high tension, bore these questions and these proddings as best he could, but not too patiently we may be sure. As the day drew near the Pope, now visibly nearing his end, grew more importunate. Once too often came the question: "When will you have done?" and the sore tired artist snapped out: "When I get ready." Instantly the smouldering fire of the old titan's passion blazed forth. He thundered on the stone floor with his staff and shouted: "And I command you to be ready forthwith." The artist returned to the Chapel, the scaffolding was removed, and the work — always regarded by the artist as unfinished — was given to the world as we see it today.

It was in October, 1512, that Michelangelo wrote to his father: "I have finished the chapel I was painting.

The Pope seems quite well satisfied." Four years and seven months had elapsed since the awarding of the commission. Of this period less than three years had been spent in actual painting. Ten months were spent in making the cartoons, building the scaffolding, and other preparations. The first uncovering interrupted the work for eleven months. Time was lost in replacing the early, unsuccessful work, in trips to Bologna, and in other ways, how much time we can only conjecture. All told, the statement of his early biographer that he completed the work unaided in twenty months, a statement usually rejected as preposterous, seems not so much out of the way. In execution as in conception it was an all time record.

CHAPTER VI

THE DECORATION

The work of Michelangelo may be viewed from many standpoints. There can be little doubt that to most observers his work is primarily a spiritual revelation. They see in his characters, along with endless variety of individual characteristics, a dominant spiritual mood of somber, unconscious pathos, a mood of rare beauty and power. To those susceptible to this spiritual appeal Michelangelo is easily first among those prophets of the spirit who have spoken the language of art.

Others are chiefly interested in his realism, his power to represent the human figure, his incredible repertory of type, of pose, and of action. Volumes have been written and sweeping judgments pronounced upon the artist simply from this point of view.

Still a third point of view is that of decoration. These works are executed on the ceiling of a chapel. They thus become part of the chapel. Are they a congruous part? Do they respect the integrity of the chapel; do they help us to understand it; explain its use? In short, do they make it a better, a more beautiful chapel? This is quite a different question from the beauty of the works themselves. A room filled with beautiful things is not necessarily a beautiful room. It may be very much the reverse. This is the problem of decoration. Let us consider Michelangelo's work briefly from the decorative point of view.

A conspicuous feature of the work is the setting which Michelangelo has created for his figures and his

pictorial panels. Such a setting or framework was obviously needed. The figures, standing or sitting, which are the real subject of the work must have something to sit or stand on. There was need of something also to give plausibility and meaning to the whole. To this end Michelangelo covered the whole ceiling with an elaborate screen or framework of architecture which furnished thrones for the Prophets and Sibyls, pedestals for the decorative figures, and frames for the pictorial panels. This has been much criticised from the architectural standpoint not only as complicating and falsifying the intention of the builder of the Chapel but as being inconsistent with itself. The criticism is just but the critic does not always realize the reason for the inconsistencies or the difficulty of providing an alternative scheme. It was inevitable that Michelangelo and indeed almost any artist of the Renaissance should choose an architectural rather than a nature setting for such a work. Nor is it clear that anything else would have worked out better despite the obvious difficulties of the latter.

A representation of architecture consisting of heavy masses, cornices, pilasters, and the like which project from walls and ceiling into the room, to be true to reality, must be conceived as seen from a single point and foreshortened as real architecture would be if seen from the same point. Real architecture can be viewed from any point and its projecting and interlacing members will adjust themselves to the changing point of view, constantly revealing new foreshortenings and a new perspective. Painted architecture will not thus adjust itself. If painted correctly as seen from one end of the room it appears absurd from the other end. Michelangelo was quite as conscious of this difficulty as his

critics and he resorted to the inevitable compromise of drawing it to be seen from several points of view, the nearer portion in each case being foreshortened as carefully as possible for that viewpoint with the expectation that the remoter portions would not be noticed. In fact none but the trained architect notices the discrepancy. But we can imagine Michelangelo's dissatisfaction with such expedients. It certainly tended to confirm his view that painting was a false art and may account in part for his assertion that the Ceiling was a frivolous work.

The interference of this conspicuous false architecture with the real architecture of the chapel is a more serious objection. If we forgive it more easily it is because of the commonplaceness of the architect's design and such interference with it as may have served the painter's purpose we are quite ready to allow. It must not be overlooked, however, that such interference is the very antithesis of decoration. Even conceding that the architecture of the Chapel was unsatisfactory and that this architecture was painted in to supply its deficiencies or to correct its faults the procedure would be most doubtful. As a matter of fact it was painted for no such purpose. It was painted merely to serve as footstools for the artist's figures and apparently with little thought of anything else.

Turning from the setting to the subject proper we are reminded of other difficulties due in part to the nature of the art and in part to the ideals and prejudices of the age and of the artist himself. Certain things were foregone conclusions in his time which would now be matters of wide difference of opinion. Such was the assumption that the human figure was the one true subject of art, an assumption which, with Michelangelo (a sculptor,

be it remembered), amounted to dogmatic assertion. Whatever the artist of the Renaissance wished to express, he expressed it through the human figure. Thus, when Botticelli sought to express the spirit of spring, the awakening year, he did so — with quite remarkable success — by means of a group of figures. A modern painter would choose a spring landscape with apple blossoms or the like. This limitation of art subject decidedly narrowed the range of decorative adaptation. Not that the human figure does not lend itself to the subtle adaptations required. Quite the contrary. It is peculiarly impressive in appropriate use if the artist is free to conventionalize it, that is, to assimilate it to the architectural forms about it.

This, however, is precisely what the Renaissance was unwilling to do. Along with all its idealism, an idealism that expressed itself through the human figure in infinitely varied action, posture, and expression, there was an unrelenting demand for naturalness of representation. The Italian painters were at once idealistic and realistic, a perfectly possible combination. This character of the Renaissance Michelangelo represented in its most pronounced form. No figures are so varied in attitude as his, yet no attitudes are so spontaneous, so natural. This spontaneity and naturalness made his figures profoundly expressive but it did not make them decorative. There is about them nothing of that subtle assimilation, that sympathy with surrounding forms, which is of the essence of decoration. The admirer of Michelangelo naturally hesitates to deny to him any quality which commands homage but he does not need our extreme championship. In that which he tried to do — that which the entire Renaissance tried to do — his triumph is complete. But he was not a decorator.

If that word is to have any rational meaning it must imply respect for the thing decorated, a constant consciousness of its character and function, and the subordination of the decorative effort to them. No age ever forgot this so completely as the Renaissance and no artist more completely than Michelangelo. Like all the painting of his time his work claims attention in its own right, subordinates the building to its own interests, and regards its walls merely as a substitute for the painter's canvas.

This is not a criticism of the Renaissance; it is a characterization. The painting of the Renaissance is *art* in a very high sense but it is not *decoration*. It seeks to be beautiful in itself, not to make something else beautiful. Beautiful things painted on a wall do not make a beautiful room. The Sistine Chapel is the proof. But beautiful things painted on a wall may make something more beautiful than a beautiful room. Again the Chapel is the proof. Who would not give any number of such chapels for another such ceiling? Let us repeat; there is no compelling reason why a painting — even a mural painting — should be decorative. It is the temper of an age, a temper forgotten in the next. Incidentally it is the growing temper of our own age, a temper unfavorable to the appreciation of Michelangelo and the age which he represents. Let us concede its judgment that Michelangelo was not a decorator but not the implied disparagement. Was it his weakness or was it that he was too great?

In one important respect, however, Michelangelo rejected the extreme claims of naturalism. We have noted the use of corrective foreshortening to make figures stand erect on an inclined wall. It is a question whether this clever invention did not make more difficulties than

it removed. It made the figures stand erect but what were they to stand on? At the base where the slope of the vault approached the perpendicular a plausible suggestion could be made. But at the top of the vault where the surface was nearly horizontal this attempt to be realistic was to the last degree artificial. One can not fail to admire the ingenuity with which the painters devised balconies and balustrades over which people were depicted as gazing down at the spectator below. The favorite theme, however, was the Assumption of the Virgin or some other taking up into heaven which permitted the erect figure without the troublesome support. The plausibility of such representations made the artists forget their artistic impossibility and the ambitious came to grief. The tragic experience of Correggio in Parma is well known.

Michelangelo realized the absurdity of such representations. He perceived that the use of corrective foreshortening, the *fad* of his day, must be held within the strictest limits of common sense. On the lower slopes of the vault where the surface approaches the perpendicular it was feasible to give to his figures, by moderate foreshortening, an erect attitude. But at the top of the vault where the surface was essentially horizontal he abandoned the attempt altogether. Most of the panels — the Creation of Man, the Expulsion from Eden, etc. — are painted exactly as they would be for an upright wall. The figures, prone horizontal, are not foreshortened and their erect posture is left to the imagination. This was clearly the less of two evils. No one looking at these panels is confused by their horizontal position though he has reason enough to wish that they were more conveniently located.

Certain of the panels, however, are conceived in still

a different way. They are treated as windows or openings to the sky and across the field of vision moves the figure of the Creator prone forward in his creative task. These panels are of incomparable grandeur and all un-plausibility of attitude and position disappears, thanks to the extraordinary theme.

The good judgment and skill of the artist in handling these difficulties are beyond all praise, but once again the result can hardly have been satisfactory to him. The figures in the Ceiling were arranged on three different principles quite inconsistent with one another. There were heavy demands upon the imagination and upon the comfort of the spectator. What wonder that he worked unwillingly! What wonder that to him it was a frivolous work!

CHAPTER VII

THE CREATION

The long, central portion of the Ceiling, the part of the work which was first completed and uncovered, consists of a series of panels in which is depicted the story of the Creation and the Flood. As the story of the Creation occupies most of the space and contains by far the most impressive panels we may follow popular usage and speak of the whole as the Creation.

These panels are alternately large and small, the whole being united by a magnificent conventional and figure setting which contains some of the most significant figures in the Ceiling, figures which we can conveniently reserve for later consideration. Of the panels, the larger are reserved for the more important and dramatic incidents of the bible story and the smaller for those which were artistically of less moment. Incidents are selected with little regard to the narrative sequence or even to its completeness. Michelangelo is the farthest removed from a mere story teller and he always has a purpose quite independent of the Bible narrative. His individual representations are not always easy to identify with a particular verse or statement, yet nothing is plainer than that they are based on profound study of the story as written, a grasp rather of its spirit than of its details. Do we realize the dramatic power of that ancient Hebrew story?

The story begins at the west end of the Chapel and unrolls toward the east. Michelangelo painted it in the

opposite order as is obvious even to the unskilled observer, but except to the student of his technical development that fact is of no importance. We will take it in the logical order.

“And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

A window seems to open toward heaven giving us a view, not into the empyrean, but into a murky, formless mass, the unwrought stuff of a world to be. Across the field of vision moves a powerful form, dynamic, resistless, inscrutable. His arms are stretched out, tense and powerful, as of a swimmer who buffets the waves. The head is upturned concealing the face. We see only the bearded chin from beneath. What is he doing? We do not know. Is it constructive, creative? We can not say. Is it beneficent? There is no sign. The Spirit of God moves upon the face of the waters. So much and only so much would we have seen if we had been witnesses of that first act of creation. So much and only so much has the artist chosen to reveal in this first representation.

This simplification of theme, this isolation of a single thought, a single mood, is the vital principle of the whole work, indeed of the entire art of Michelangelo. Whatever the nominal subject, each incident, each individual, is dominated by a certain spiritual mood. This, to Michelangelo — to great art everywhere — is the only thing that counts. Indeed it is the very function of art, its reason for existence, to isolate this spiritual essence of incident and personality and free it from the irrelevant detail with which it is normally encumbered. Painting has been defined as “the art of leaving things out,” an incomplete but profoundly significant definition.



SEPARATION OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

This first scene of the creation is an extreme example of this simplification. The Creator is obviously the one subject of representation but the simplification goes still farther. Only a single aspect of his personality is revealed. We seek to see his face for no other reason than that we may see what he is like, divine his purpose, forecast the outcome, in short, we wish to anticipate the later chapters. The face is concealed. One thing at a time. Power, resistless, illimitable, aroused to action. Only that now, but how much more we feel that because only that is shown.

It is well to recall here Michelangelo's insistence upon the human figure as the one theme of art. It is clear that such a principle imposed severe limitations upon the artist who chose such a theme as the creation. What a handicap not to be able to represent the garden with all its botanical and zoological attractions! He could represent the Creator as a glorified human being transcendent in majesty and power, but until the advent of man he could not represent his handiwork. Michelangelo accepts the limitation without qualification. He is not betrayed into the foolish representation of the animals that went up into the Ark upon which so many Renaissance craftsmen squandered their powers. The spiritual essence of the creative act is always the Creator, not the created thing. The latter he reduces to the merest hint. But each act has a spiritual character, a soul, so to speak, which is revealed in the mood of the Creator. The story of Creation, therefore, becomes a series of manifestations of the Creator who appears in each act in a mood which expresses the spiritual character or soul of the act.

To the ancients all things were composed of certain elements, not at all those with which modern science has

made us familiar, but those familiar to primitive observation — earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Such are the elements in Buddhist thought and every Buddhist monument still has five parts representing in conventional form these five elements.

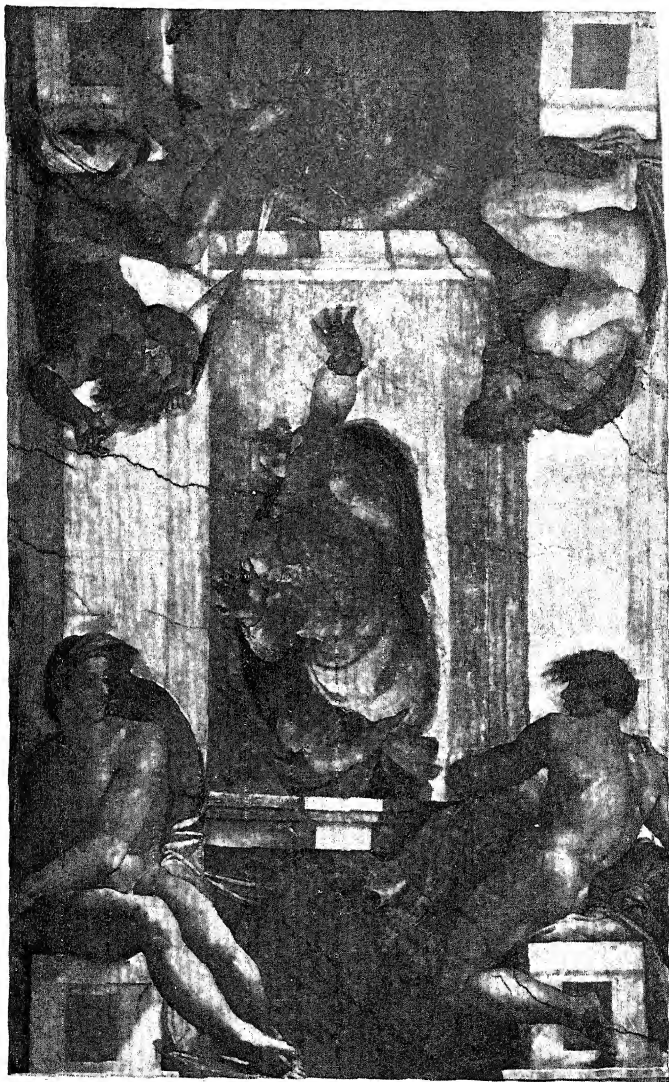
Of these elements part were active and part were passive. Thus, earth is obviously a passive element; water, too, though more mobile than earth, if left to itself, invariably settles down into complete passivity. These, therefore, are the passive elements.

But fire is known to us only in active form. It changes all that comes in contact with it. Air, too, has a way of moving without apparent cause. The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth. The air, therefore, seemed to have the power of initiative and was thus an active element.

“And God said, Let the waters under the firmament be gathered together unto one place and let the dry land appear.”

Thus is described the separation of the dry land from the sea, or in other words, the creation of earth and water, the passive elements.

Again a window opens and we have a distant view with the faintest hint of horizon and undefined firmament of land or sea. Again the Creator moves majestically across the field of vision. But all is contrast as compared with the foregoing. The figure is not dynamic but passive. His movement suggests the momentum of a past impulse, not the energy of present assertion. The arms are outstretched but relaxed rather than tense, like the arms of a priest in benediction. The face is visible but is inexpressive, the embodiment of calm. Passivity permeates all. In this mood of the Creator



CREATION OF LAND AND WATER
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

Michelangelo has revealed the spirit or soul of the creative act, the creation of the passive elements.

"And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth."

The quaint words of the Hebrew story reflect but faintly the majesty of this creation of the lord of the day, this embodiment of the terrible energy of fire, as it presented itself to Michelangelo's imagination. In fullest manifestation of his boundless energy the Creator appears, his form suddenly erect, with streaming hair and beard, with flashing eyes under knitted brows, his mighty arm is nerved to utmost exertion as he flings off the great orb of day on its everlasting course.

It is a truism of art criticism that the static arts can not safely attempt the representation of power in violent action. To do so is in general to suggest the limitations of art rather than the plenitude of power. The artist must content himself with suggestion; he represents at his peril. But Michelangelo has dared representation to the uttermost and with complete success. Here, as nowhere else in art or literature, we behold omnipotence.

So much for the representation of the Creator's mood, the soul and spiritual essence of the act. But some hint of the thing created seemed essential. Feeble indeed is the hint of earth and water in the representation of their creation, nor can the disk that stands for the sun in this scene be deemed much more adequate. The artist can not paint the sun, though a weaker artist might have risked a closer approximation. Suggestion, however, appears in an entirely different form.

In the creation of earth and water the Creator is accompanied by two small figures too often taken to be



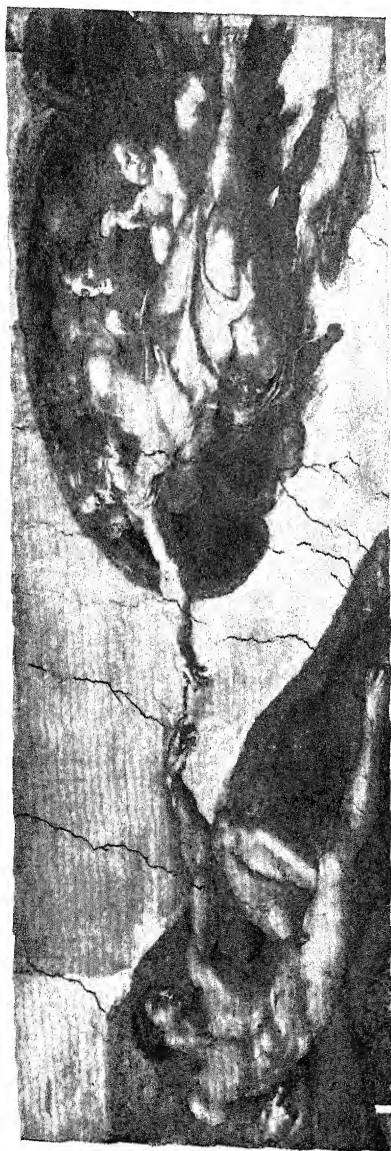
CREATION OF SUN AND MOON
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

mere decorative adjuncts, convenient items with which the artist has arbitrarily filled out his composition. We are to meet them in various associations throughout the Ceiling with varying but always significant meaning. We can hardly name them for they correspond to no traditional category. They serve in one way or another as a foil to the character with which they are associated. In the case before us they are spectators and by their attitude and reaction they express what we may be supposed to feel as we contemplate these successive acts of creation. In the creation of earth and water they reflect the passivity of the Creator. One gazes forward at the waters that have not yet felt the Creator's power and the other backward to see the change effected by his passing. It is the "before-and-after" motive in its simplest form.

How complete the change as we come to the creation of the sun! One holds up an arm to shield the eyes from the blaze of the new luminary while another darts round and gazes with wonder, almost with terror, at the face of the Creator, as if to divine the meaning of this unwonted act.

"And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Again the Creator changes. The inertness and the violence of the earlier creative acts have alike passed away. Equally absent is the sentimentality with which a less virile age has sought to endow him. Quietly active with a calm and confidence-compelling countenance, he reaches out his arm and with the touch of his finger communicates life to the reclining figure of Adam who with upraised head and sanguine gaze



THE CREATION OF MAN
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

accepts the great gift as a boon. Meanwhile the attendant figures view with appropriate eagerness this crowning act of creation. They crowd the ample folds of the Creator's garments, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of this new and supreme creation. One of these figures, however, is not like the rest. Not a child form, this; a woman withal; half hidden behind the Creator, his arm about her neck, she turns away, yet casts a shy and curious glance in the direction of the common interest. Can we not almost hear the Creator say: "It is not good for man to be alone"?

The figure of Adam has long been the subject of the highest praise, not without reason, though whether with better title than other figures is not so clear. Yet in a sense this figure is unique. It illustrates as does no other the dual character of line upon the subtle combination of which so much in art depends.

Line serves first to define the objects represented, to show their contour and linear detail. Line in this sense is good in the measure that it represents correctly, or if not with literal truth to nature, then with such deliberate deviation from nature as may be accounted in the interest of art. In this sense it can hardly be said that the figure of Adam enjoys pre-eminence over many another in this, perhaps the greatest of all assemblages of masterly drawing in existence. Michelangelo is no slavish imitator of nature. He does not hesitate to depart from nature in the interest of spiritual expression, a principle which is anathema to the studio hack. But at least he knows perfectly what he is doing and does it with masterly skill.

But there is another use of line which has nothing to do with representation, or at best bears some such relation to it as music bears to the words of a song. Line

has a quality of its own quite independent of anything that it represents. The straight line suggests force, rigidity; the curve means softness, grace, weakness; the angle suggests harshness, aggression. These connotations are familiar to all and may be traced in the metaphorical meanings of familiar words. This is but the simplest possible illustration of a vast and infinitely subtle language of line which the artistic intuition uses with unconscious discrimination to translate the prose of nature into the poetry, the music of art. For it must be remembered that the human figure is an infinitely supple thing and by changing its posture and expression the artist can with equal correctness represent it with straight line or curve and that in infinite variety. In so doing he will vary indefinitely its value and meaning in art.

The Adam, a virile, manly form, is drawn almost wholly in curves. A long, unbroken curve sweeps from the head through the central axis of the figure to the foot. A similar curve runs from the right armpit to the knee and is echoed from the knee to the foot. Similar curves bound the upraised left leg, the left arm, and — most expressive of all — the upper contour of the outstretched hand. Indeed it would be difficult to find a more striking example of the significant use of line than in the contrast of these two hands, the one alive, energized, giving of its own redundant power; the other limp and lifeless in its faultless form, waiting for the gift of life. Michelangelo's hands are as expressive as his faces. Were this ceiling to crumble into ruin and leave us but these two hands, the story of the giving and the receiving of life would still be told complete. The face is not less expressive and is the more significant that the expression is one not characteristic of the

artist or consonant with his temperament. Adam accepts with sanguine confidence the proffered gift, not doubting that it is good. There is nothing here of the weary titan so familiar in his art, nothing of the haunting pathos of the Dying Youth or the Libyan Sibyl. Temperament is held in abeyance to the needs of his theme.

“And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an helpmeet for him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs. And the rib made He a woman and brought her unto the man.”

The arrival of woman, that supreme theme of art through the ages, was not happily conceived by the Hebrew narrator. Michelangelo, though always a loyal son of the church, never felt himself bound by the letter and not always by the spirit of the Bible account. In the *Creation of Man* we have seen him represent the Creator, not as breathing into his nostrils the breath of life, but as a wakening him to life by a touch. We shall see still more striking changes, not only of form but of substance, before we are through.

The uncouth story of the *Creation of Woman* was even more impossible. The artist satisfies the requirements by the remotest of hints. A deep sleep has fallen upon Adam who lies with closed eyelids in obvious unconsciousness, an unconsciousness greatly emphasized by the obliterating shadow which envelops his form. In full light stands Eve in the presence of the Creator, an example of that mature female form which Michelangelo, in contrast with artists generally, preferred to more youthful and girlish beauty. Only her position,

standing near the side of the sleeping Adam, hints at her costal origin.

But if this scene has less of poetry and majesty than those on either side it has a significance of quite another kind. Michelangelo is learning to paint. He did not know how to paint when he began. He knew how to conceive, to create. In this highest of art faculties he had no peer. He knew how to express his conceptions through sculpture. In this again he stood alone. In the measure that the sculptor's art coincided with that of the painter he was again incontestably a master. He could draw; he could model — with the pencil as well as with the clay or chisel. But he told Pope Julius the simple truth when he said he did not know how to paint. It was not that he lacked the painter's skill; he lacked the painter's conception, the painter's vision. He had a very subtle appreciation of light and shade, but in his previous painting he had used it solely to depict form, that is, to model his figures, to make sham statues as he would have put it. With the painter this is a very secondary, almost a negligible use of light and shade. To him their chief use is to modulate his spaces. He wishes some figures or other parts of his composition to stand out in full light, others to be toned down, and still others to be reduced to mere hints in obscuring shadow. He accomplishes all this by distributing shadows, heavy or light through his space, sometimes arbitrarily, sometimes by simulating the shadows of nature. An artist like Rembrandt skilled in this use of shadow and exploiting to the utmost its possibilities becomes a veritable conjurer whose pictures set the stage for a magician. Shadow with its immense emotional appeal becomes the real subject of the painting and the figures that move, almost obliterated in its



THE CREATION OF EVE
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

somber depths, serve as little more than foils to suggest its power over our spirits. There is no higher art than this conjuring with the magic of shadow.

Of all this Michelangelo had known nothing. His paintings had given us colored statues exposed to a piteously revealing light. But here in this Creation of Woman — one of the early panels of the Ceiling — we find the recognition of painter's shadows. Adam is not merely modeled by the use of light and shade. He is surrounded, subordinated, half obscured by shadows of environment. A new art has begun which the artist will carry far before his work is done.

"And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat. And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me and I did eat. Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. And he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."

The Fall and Expulsion from Eden combined in a single panel is perhaps the masterpiece of the Ceiling, both for the decorative character of its balanced composition and for the boldness and originality of its interpretation. In the center rises the tree around which coils the body of the serpent, that uncouth monster with serpent body and human head and arms, a conception not original with Michelangelo but long familiar in art where the role assigned to the serpent could hardly be represented without the necessary organs. The serpent offers the fruit to Eve, a magnificent creature, who accepts it nothing loath. So far the story follows the text. Not so when it comes to Adam. He is not waiting for Eve to give him of the fruit nor yet to

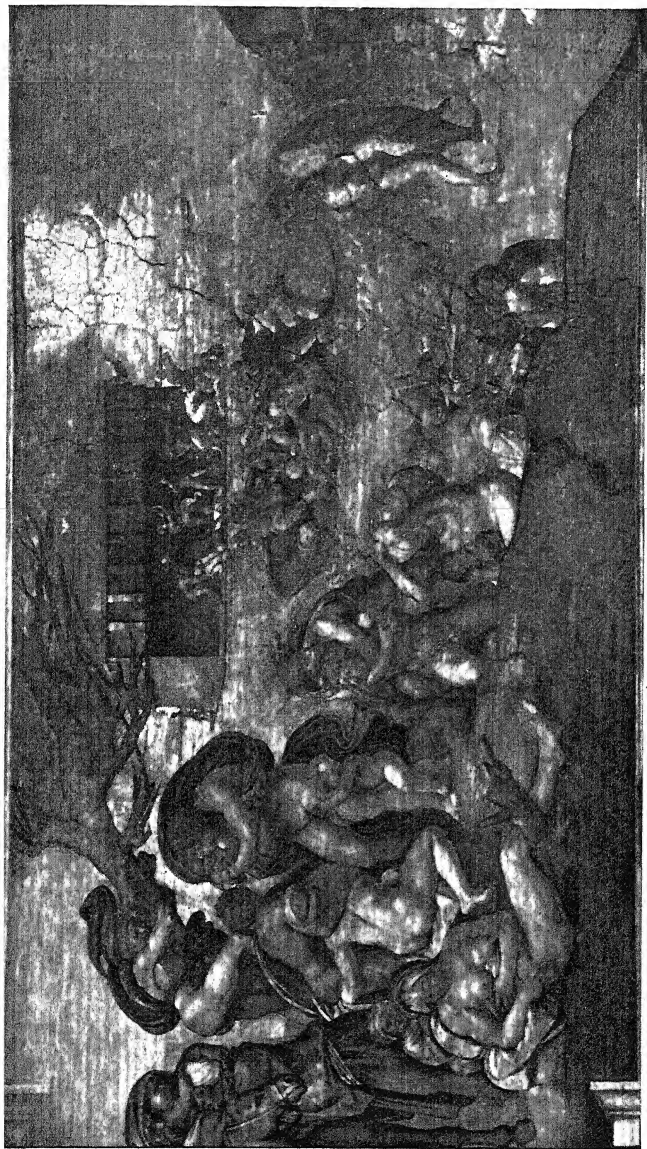


TEMPTATION AND EXPULSION FROM EDEN
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

be served by the serpent in turn. Bold and incontinent he reaches into the tree and helps himself, asking no odds of tempter or temptress. An amazingly natural Adam, this, but not the Adam of the Bible who meekly follows Eve's initiative, nor yet the Adam of Milton who deplores the woman's trespass and then magnanimously resolves to share her fate. Here is masculine aggressiveness, that aggressiveness which biologists tell us is the characteristic of the male through all the scale of being as far as we can trace the fact of sex.

Not less penetrating in its truth to nature is the artist's interpretation of the sequel. As the guilty couple are expelled from the Garden whose privileges they have forfeited, the cringing, cowering figure of Eve goes on before followed close by Adam who turns and with menacing gesture holds even the angel of the Lord at bay. No harm shall come to her while he can protect. Is chivalrous protection not as true of masculine nature as leadership in transgression?

There follow in succession the Sacrifice of Noah, the Deluge and the Drunkenness of Noah, all of them early panels, admirable in composition and execution but from the nature of their subject less original and creative than those above considered. Perhaps the Deluge, if any part of the Ceiling, may be termed disappointing. Not that the figures are less significant or less perfectly represented than others, but they are more numerous and in smaller scale and therefore less effective at the great height at which they are to be seen. They are also distinctly less congenial to Michelangelo than the huge, awe-inspiring figures which we have considered. The ability to portray the human figure in colossal size without coarseness or flabbiness is a special faculty, the possession of very few. It was in such portrayal that



THE DELUGE. (Detail)
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

Michelangelo was at his best. His representations of the Creator are not only gigantic but infinitely majestic and noble. The smaller scale so congenial to a Raphael or a Fra Angelico was ill suited to the titanic spirits, the mighty emotions, that are his constant themes. All this became increasingly evident — to him as to us — as the great work progressed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PROPHETS

The long interval of nearly a year between the uncovering of the portion of the work which we have been considering and the resumption of work on the remainder can hardly fail to have had its influence on this second part of the undertaking. Michelangelo, apparently not engaged upon any other undertaking of importance in the interval, had opportunity to study his earlier work and in particular to note the impression which it produced upon others. Slowly it must have become clear to him that interest centered in those panels which were dominated by one or two colossal figures which he had found so congenial to the expression of his own artistic temperament. If the character of the later work was not already determined this experience must have decided it. It is unlikely that cartoons for this part of the work had been made at the outset. If made, it is more than likely that they were discarded and new ones made as the incessantly active mind of the artist discovered new possibilities or met new difficulties in the undertaking. Indeed this may well have been the explanation of the long delay. If the work as it now exists was in the artist's mind from the outset he apparently guarded the secret. The plea that this second part of the work be given to Raphael can hardly have been made except on the assumption that these side spaces, like the panels above, were to be filled with pictorial compositions.

Be this as it may, the ultimate decision was indubitably right. These great spaces between the window vaults, broad above and narrowing below to a blunted point, could not have been filled satisfactorily with pictorial compositions even by the ingenious Raphael. A single colossal figure, such as Michelangelo loved, with the appropriate adjuncts to fill the flaring space was clearly the wiser choice. Whether this would have been clear to us or even to him in advance of the achievement is not so certain. The spaces are after all not at all such as would naturally be chosen for single figures.

It was probably the existence of these twelve spaces, five on each side and one on each end, that suggested to the Pope his original proposal of the twelve apostles as the subject for the ceiling. Michelangelo considered the proposal and perhaps worked upon it but finally gave it as his judgment that it would not work out well. The Pope wisely withdrew the suggestion and allowed him full liberty. We do not know why Michelangelo preferred prophets to apostles. Perhaps the books which bear their names gave him information about them which is lacking concerning most of the apostles, information of which he made most marvelous use. Yet the sibyls offered him no such advantage and in the obscurity that shrouds them his imagination found its fuller opportunity.

His preference is one of the inscrutables of the artist's imagination. All we know is that the artist must follow his own vision, not that of another. The vision of another may be admirable, may commend itself to the artist, may seem to have become his own. All in vain. It will not become art at his hands. What more melancholy than Mantegna's pictures painted at the suggestion of Isabella d'Este or Titian's painted at the



THE PROPHET ZECHARIAH
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

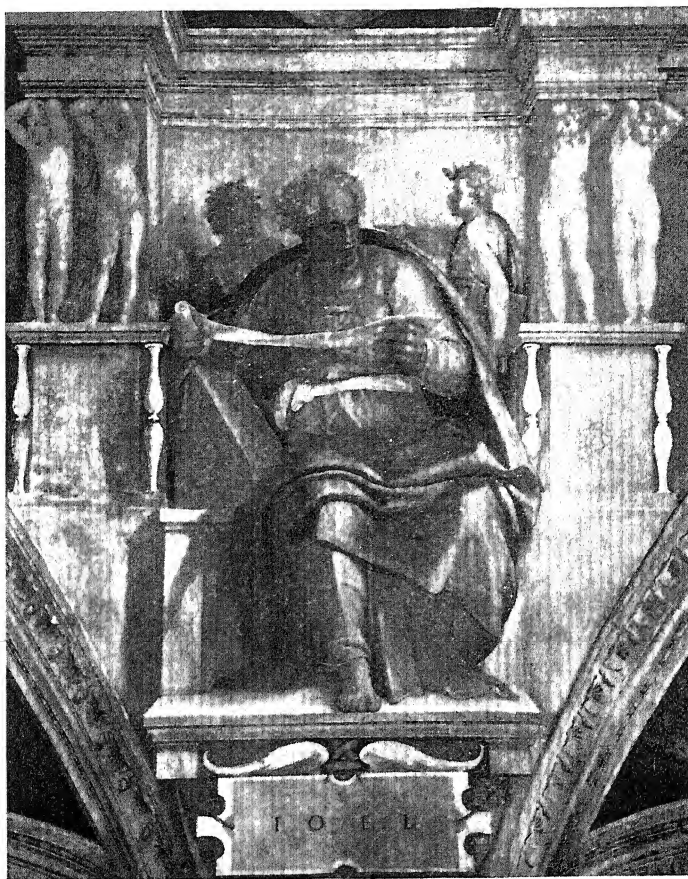
suggestion of Philip II! It is much to the credit of Julius that his imperious nature knew its bounds.

Seven prophets and five sibyls fill these twelve spaces. On the sides they alternate, but a prophet occupies the space at either end. Occupying the lower slopes of the vault, the artist applies to the full the principle of corrective foreshortening which gives them the desired erect posture. Enthroned in majesty they are utterly free from the conventional stiffness of regal decorum. Though never indecorous or undignified they are wholly unconstrained and express through posture and countenance the thoughts and emotions of the moment. For there is always a moment, a special situation or event to which they are reacting at the time. Never are they mere abstractions of character.

We are aware that a distinction is made between major and minor prophets, a distinction not always clearly defined in popular thought and often vaguely associated with the size of the books that bear their names. Whether Michelangelo was aware of this classification is not clear but it finds in his delineation of their several characters perhaps its most significant definition.

At the east end of the Chapel sits enthroned the Prophet Zechariah, a massive and tranquil figure suggestive of spiritual calm and quiet power. He sits unconventionally, one foot upon the footstool, the other resting lightly on the floor below. He turns sidewise and is completely absorbed in the open book in which he is reading. Behind him stand two child figures who gaze over his shoulder perhaps at the book, figures of whose presence he seems to be quite unconscious. He is reading in the book.

Near by, the first figure on the south wall, sits the



THE PROPHET JOEL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome



THE PROPHET EZEKIEL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

Prophet Joel, a similar and perhaps even finer figure, again in a wholly spontaneous and unconventional pose. He holds an open manuscript in which he is reading with complete absorption unmindful of the attendant figures who obviously invite his attention. He has no time for them. He too is reading in the book.

Zechariah and Joel are minor prophets. The attendant figures which we have seen as associated with the Creator and which we must still think of as betokening his presence — we may call them inspiration, the still, small voice — these are present but not in conscious or direct communication. The prophets are reading in the book. The minor prophet is the prophet who reads in the book. It is his wisdom, his appropriate choice. Only a few are privileged to listen to the voice.

Note the change as we pass to the Prophet Ezekiel. The same powerful figure as before he sits as if about to spring from his seat. A manuscript half unrolled is clutched unconsciously in his left hand, the unrolled portion falling neglected to the floor. The right hand is stretched out in an excited gesture. No longer do the attendant figures stand idle, waiting for a hearing. With intent countenance and outstretched arm one points to something as who should say: "Look, look," and the prophet looks with eyes starting from their sockets as the mighty pageant of Ezekiel's vision, the Lord of Heaven borne by the four winged creatures, passes through the skies. Such is the major prophet whose eyes are unsealed and who listens to the voice.

But there are other visions than that of Ezekiel. By common consent Isaiah holds the place of honor among the prophets. He is pre-eminently the spiritual prophet. While the others busied themselves for the most part with problems of politics and statesmanship and saw

Israel's deliverance in the restoration of the kingdom of David, he saw the problem as a spiritual one. The struggle was with human perversity and deliverance could come only through spiritual regeneration. The Messiah when he came would not meet the welcome so fondly imagined but would be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Surely not a message to be read in the book. Such a prophet must listen to the voice.

The figure is perhaps the noblest of all in this wonderful series. The pose is perhaps the quietest, the least agitated of all, yet spiritually it is tense with restrained emotion. This emotion is shared by the attendant figure who addresses the prophet with intense earnestness. And Isaiah listens, oh, how he listens, yet not with craning neck and staring eyes like Ezekiel. The eyes are well nigh closed; the gaze is turned inward; for the vision is not of earth or heaven but of the heart of man.

With Jeremiah the scene again changes and Michelangelo attains perhaps his highest level of interpretive insight. Jeremiah fell upon evil days and had the unhappy lot of witnessing a national policy which he was powerless to change and which he foresaw was leading to certain ruin. Quite naturally he became the pessimist among the prophets and his pessimism is commemorated in the familiar term, *jeremiad*, a prophecy of despair. Compare him with the fiery Ezekiel, that tense figure who, with feet planted for a spring, leans forward as though about to leap from his seat. Jeremiah sits inert and lifeless, his legs crossed as if permanently cut of action, his head resting upon his hand and his elbow on his knee, the other hand hanging limp and weary in his lap, his eyes closed, for what he sees is evil and only evil continually, a picture of despair. This is



THE PROPHET ISAIAH
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome



THE PROPHET JEREMIAH
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

sufficiently impressive but it is only the beginning. Now for the first time the attendant figures are not children but adults. Michelangelo, with that unfailing insight into human nature which so far surpasses that of other artists, realizes that children can not reflect the mood of Jeremiah. Children grieve but they never despair. World weariness and hopelessness are adult experiences. Hence two adult figures fill the background of the niche, figures akin to the prophet yet contrasted withal and reflecting the age-long reactions to misfortune. Who has not seen the type that wilts under calamity, weakly deciding that "it's no use trying?" Or again that other, perhaps rarer, type whose "head is bloody but unbowed?" Has art anywhere depicted these contrasted types more perfectly than in these two figures? Note the leaden droop of the draperies as contrasted with those of Ezekiel which seem alive like their wearer; or again the lock of hair and the heavy hanging beard that yield unresisting to the tug of gravitation. Every resource not only of presentation but of subtle suggestion, that sympathy, as it were, of inanimate things, has been requisitioned for this amazing characterization.

The Prophet Daniel is in one important respect unlike the others. There is the same splendid figure, the same free and unconventional pose, the same freedom from stage consciousness and absorption in his task that characterizes the rest. Only on second glance, perhaps, do we discover that the attendant figures are lacking. There is no suggestion of a direct message. There is the book, opened not merely for reading but for copying, for the suggestion is plain that that which he is writing upon the tablet is taken from the book. To crown it all the youthful figure that we should expect to see whispering a message in his ear has been brought down



THE PROPHET DANIEL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

to hold the book from which the prophet is copying. How shall we account for these peculiarities?

There is a school of interpretation which maintains that these figures have no meaning of the kind that we are considering; that they are mere decorative elements to be used or omitted as the exigencies of the composition require. We are even assured that the prophets themselves are arbitrary figures having no relation to the characters whose names they bear and that their names may be interchanged without prejudice. There can be no doubt that many artists work on this principle, choosing figures arbitrarily to fill their spaces and in disregard of what the layman calls meaning. It may be doubted whether Michelangelo was of the number. It is recorded that he read the Bible much and made it the subject of profound study. No critic who familiarizes himself with the prophetic books would have difficulty in recognizing Ezekiel or Jeremiah or Jonah as he has represented them. Though ever conscious of the problems of composition and disposing his figures with masterly skill he is chiefly concerned to express the meanings which these critics disparage and their followers disregard.

What did Michelangelo think of the Book of Daniel? It must be remembered that though loyal and devout he never hesitated to entertain individual opinions of either popes or prophets. Even Luther, the defender of Bible authority, declared that the Epistle of James was an "epistle of straw." Michelangelo was no less free in his judgments. Profound as was his insight he was as simple and straightforward as a child. If his meaning is too much for us it is never because of intricacy or indirection but because it is freighted with an emotion beyond our capacity to feel.

Such a man could have gotten little satisfaction from the Book of Daniel. Originating at a time when freedom of utterance was denied it is written in a sort of cipher unintelligible to us and therefore the subject of unending fantasy and absurdity of interpretation. The athletic figure of the goodly youth nourished on pulse and water in lieu of the king's meat had its attractions for the artist, but — if we may hazard a suggestion that is not to be pressed too seriously — the *prophet* did not appeal to him. Hence the absence of whispered inspiration and the menial, not to say humiliating service required of its accustomed bearer.

Jonah holds the place of honor in the Ceiling. The strangest, the most startling, and perhaps the most significant of all the series, this figure has been the subject of endless speculation and unstinted praise, especially as the supreme example of that foreshortening then so much esteemed in vault decoration. Michelangelo himself gave it the place of honor above the high altar where it challenges the attention of those entering by the great doorway or seated in conclave.

None of the prophets more clearly reveals a study of the Bible text than Jonah. The book is a very small one, less than two pages in the ordinary text. Save for a couple of geographical names apparently chosen for literary reasons it has no setting in time or place. It is a story with a moral and told only for its moral. Perhaps we may call it a "short story," or if we prefer, a parable which means much the same. The writer is a Hebrew whose purpose is to rebuke his people for their race exclusiveness. Like the oriental story teller from time immemorial he invokes the supernatural to help out the exigencies of his plot. (Have we not read the Arabian Nights?) It is a pity that the unimaginative



THE PROPHET JONAH
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

westerner should so often have missed the point of this admirable story because of his unfamiliarity with this time honored literary device of the East.

Jonah, a Hebrew prophet, is bidden to preach repentance to the great city of Nineveh which the Lord is soon to destroy. The writer purposely chooses the metropolis of the ancient world to emphasize his point. Jonah refuses to go. His interests and sympathies are exclusively Hebrew. But Jonah has to go. The Lord has his ways of enforcing obedience — in this case a peculiar way, but that is irrelevant. Jonah goes in a none too sympathetic mood and delivers his message unsparingly. Nineveh is terror stricken and repents wholesale. Then, to the prophet's unbounded confusion, the Lord changes his mind and forgives the repentent Ninevites. The prophet cannot repress his indignation. He has left the work in which he was engaged, a work that commanded his sympathies, and has come unwillingly and at great hazard to deliver the message of doom. He has followed instructions to the letter and now, the time expired and his prophecy not fulfilled, he stands discredited in the eyes of all men. In a towering rage he lies down under the shade of an arbor and falls asleep. But a worm cuts down the gourd that furnished the grateful shade and he awakes with the sun upon him and a new exasperation that the gourd is destroyed. "Then said the Lord, Thou has had pity on the gourd, for that which thou hast not labored neither madest it grow; which come up in a night and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left?" What story ever made a plainer protest against the pettiness and callousness of men?

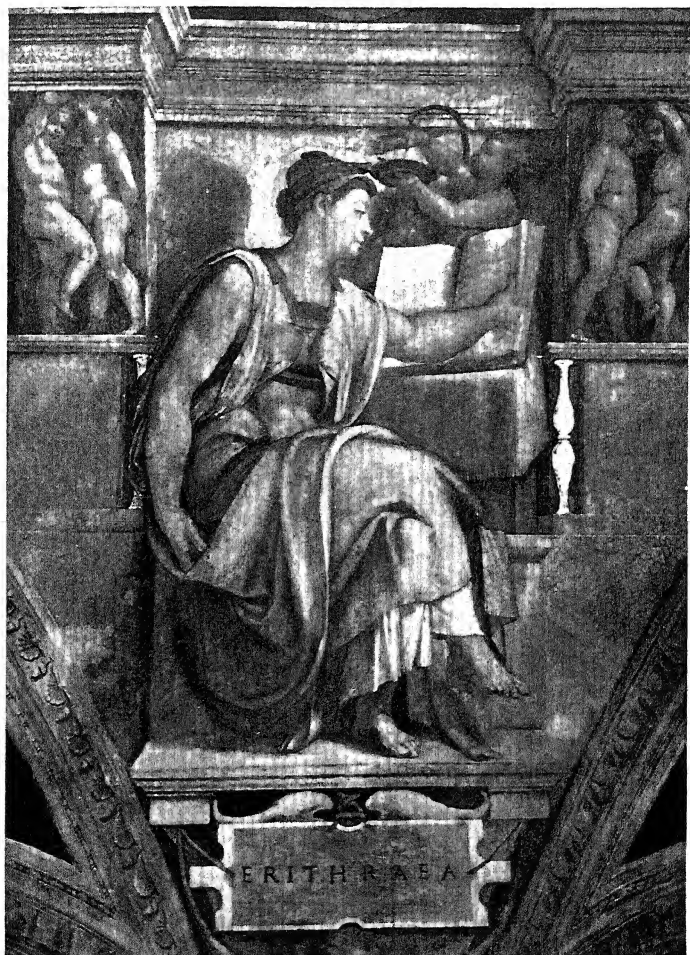
Perched upon his high seat, his powerful figure leaning far back in his colloquy with the Lord, the prophet points with undisguised and angry protest at the city below as who should say: "See! There it is, the same as ever. I told them they were to be destroyed; I named the date; the time is up and nothing has happened. Where is my reputation as a prophet?" The Lord answers as is his wont through the still, small voice. Barely emerging from the misty background is a tiny baby face, youngest and loveliest of them all, that turns great grieving eyes upon the angry prophet and raises a protesting baby arm as who should say: "Jonah! Jonah!" Nothing surpasses this wonderful interpretation. It is with impatience that we read the encomiums of Vasari upon this wonderful man who, on a wall leaning forward could make a man lean backward. An achievement surely, one unsurpassed of its kind. But what are such in comparison with these triumphs of the spirit?

CHAPTER IX

THE SIBYLS

The sibyls were pagan prophetesses connected with certain shrines where they spoke in the name of the divinities there worshipped. All were Greek in origin but they enjoyed their chief influence among the Romans whose institutions were greatly influenced in their development by their supposed utterances. They were peculiar in the possession of books, not simple records such as we understand by the term but repositories of magic powers and records or signs of mystic significance intelligible only to their possessor or her specially enlightened successors. The story of the Erythraean Sibyl who offered her nine sibylline books to Tarquin at a high price and destroyed them three at a time until the king yielded and paid her the total price for the last three is familiar. The books thus acquired enjoyed immense prestige in Rome where a commission of five patricians and five plebians was maintained to consult them and the weightiest decisions were based on alleged interpretations of their statements.

It may seem strange that Michelangelo should have placed these pagan prophetesses here as of equal rank and authority with the Hebrew prophets but it was not without precedent. It was the tradition of the Church that they had revealed — dimly, to be sure, and yet revealed — to the peoples to whom they ministered, the coming of the Savior. Thus the place is pointed out on the Capitoline where the Tiburtine Sibyl made this announcement to Augustus.



THE ERYTHREAN SIBYL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

To the artist, however, in one important respect they were different from the prophets. The sibylline books had long since perished. He could not, therefore, divine their individual characters from their utterances as in the case of Ezekiel or Jeremiah. They were in fact little more than names, the traditions regarding them being of the scantiest. This seeming disadvantage proved his opportunity. Being under no necessity of representing the individual he is free to represent the general, the universal. The sibyls represent, not prophecies but *prophecy* in its fundamental character.

If such an interpretation seems fanciful to an age so differently minded as our own it must be remembered that it was wholly characteristic of the age of Leonardo and Michelangelo. Art had outgrown the naïve anecdotalism of Giotto only to become subjective and psychological. Leonardo's Last Supper of our Lord is perhaps the profoundest psychological study of the century. To interpret through figure, posture, and facial expression the subtlest emotions and shades of temperament was wholly congenial to the spirit of the age and above all to the genius of Michelangelo. That he should use these shadowy figures of tradition to interpret that solemn function with which their names were associated was both natural and inevitable. If we, accustomed to leave such themes to Browning and to judge painting by very different standards, overlook or disparage these psychological subtleties we miss both Michelangelo's meaning and the significance of the entire age. Michelangelo tells us through the sibyls what prophecy is, what are the characters required and the emotions experienced by one who is called to make known to men the will of God. Each sibyl expresses a



THE DELPHIC SIBYL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

particular phase of the prophetic character, a particular reaction to the momentous responsibility involved.

The Erythraean Sibyl is a much praised figure, the embodiment of that ease which is never nonchalant and of that unconventionality which is never undignified. It is highly characteristic of Michelangelo that he represents her with one leg crossed over the other knee as she leans slightly forward to turn the page of her sibylline book. No stately pose of the public functionary, yet a dignity that is inherent and unmistakable. She is self-sufficient and unconscious, a powerful figure such as the artist loves. Like all Michelangelo's creations she is mature. The girlish figure seems inadequate to express the meaning which he has in mind.

Of all the sibyls the Erythraean seems the least emotionally specialized. She represents those basic qualities of power, repose, equilibrium, and stability needful for her function. She will never get excited, will never have a case of nerves, will never be swept off her feet by a tempest of emotion.

The Delphic Sibyl is in marked contrast. She is the most youthful of all, a novice, let us say, in prophecy. She alone looks away from her book, yet not toward the spectator. She is comely but that is farthest from her thoughts. Her eyes look anxiously. The mouth is lightly open to accommodate the heavier breathing that betokens excitement. The expression is one of wonder verging on anxiety. Is it fanciful to see in the anxious expression of this beautiful young creature the sense of responsibility which rests heavily, as yet, upon her unaccustomed nature? Like another called to the same part she seems to say: "Who of us is sufficient unto these things?"

The Persian Sibyl is again in uttermost contrast. As



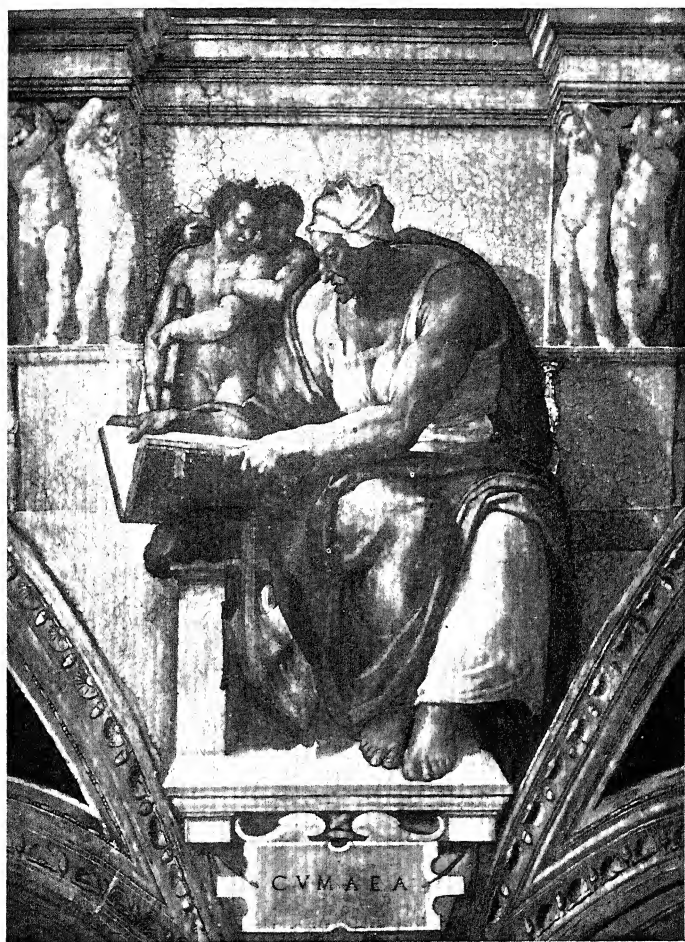
THE PERSIAN SIBYL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

the Delphica is the youngest, the Persica is the oldest of all the sibyls. Anxiety is past and has left seriousness and resignation in its stead. Her face is turned away — is scarcely seen in profile — yet we have the feeling of having seen her; we know how she looks. She reads in her book utterly lost to us, to all. That unconsciousness which characterizes all Michelangelo's figures, with her deepens into absolute absorption. Naught else she hears; naught else she sees; for her naught else matters. So, Michelangelo would tell us, is the one who is charged with communicating the awesome message.

If the Erythraean Sibyl has been most frequently praised the Cumaeen Sibyl has been the subject of most comment, not to say the most criticism, of all. The ponderous arm, the mighty torso, the relatively small head with its more than masculine ruggedness of countenance seem to justify the charge that the figure is unnatural, abnormal. What woman ever had such an arm, such a countenance? None, assuredly. Not thus is woman fashioned as we know her. If such a woman ever existed we should still ask why she appealed to the artist for such a role. What is the significance of his choice?

What do we mean by normality in such a connection? Merely the typical or average proportions of the human body, the characteristic features and expression of the human — in this case the female — face. It is a part of the training of every artist to discover these proportions, these typical features, to familiarize his eye with them and train his hand to represent them as seen. No man is ready for the practice of art until this training is acquired.

But no great artist who has acquired this skill ever holds himself to these human averages. To do so would



THE CUMAEAN SIBYL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

be to cripple fatally his power of significant utterance. Deviations from nature due to lack of skill are one thing; skilled deviations in the interest of expression are quite another. Art is not imitation. Art is the expression of significant meaning. If this meaning can be expressed by varying the proportions of the human figure or the expression of the human countenance there is no reason why the artist should not do it. It is a dangerous liberty, for the human being is a more or less sacred object to us all and we are jealous of its rights, but the skilled artist finds in the deft manipulation of its form one of the subtlest and most effective means of expression.

No great artist ever made freer use of this privilege than Michelangelo. That he was able to draw the human figure in true proportion is hardly open to doubt. When he did not do so, therefore, we may assume that it was for a purpose. He had something to say which could best be said in this manner. In this case it was something about prophecy, the communication of God's will to man. What is there about prophecy that is suggested by this dread creature? She is a powerful creature as witness the huge torso and terrible arm. She inspires an awe that is akin to terror, a will that we have no thought to withstand. All is consistently terrible.

Who has not seen a mother sternly admonish a child and threaten punishment if he does the forbidden thing? And the child looks at the mother quizzically as much as to say: "I wonder if she means it," and reading in her face that she does not, proceeds to perform the forbidden act with impunity.

Let us look for a moment at this creature, this mouth-piece of the divine will. If she said to us: "This do and thou shalt surely die," would we query: "I wonder if she means it?" Is there not in this terrible being, this



THE LIBYAN SIBYL
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

embodiment of irresistible power and will, the reminder of the certainty of the decrees of Him with whom is neither variableness nor shadow of turning?

The Libyan Sibyl is perhaps the most beautiful of the series, to some the most beautiful of all the figures in the Ceiling. The place of honor assigned to her nearest the altar would suggest that Michelangelo himself regarded her with especial satisfaction. If some catastrophe should overwhelm all that we possess of Christian art, all that has been created from the beginning until now, and we were permitted to snatch a single fragment from the wreck, this might well be our choice.

The pose is extraordinary, the most unconventional of all these unconventional representations, yet neither unnatural nor indecorous. She sits sidewise in her niche like all the rest but turns so far to lift the great book from its place behind her that she almost presents a rear view. Startling as is the attitude it is one of exquisite grace. Strong and magnificently developed as is the torso there is nothing of that unfeminine muscularity, that force bordering on ruggedness which characterizes the Cumaean. Hardly elsewhere in art has strength been made so exquisite, so tender, so feminine as here. The face which the action reveals to us slightly foreshortened and in full profile is *one of the most beautiful in art*. Only Leonardo could have rivaled it and he not in kind. Not here do we behold that subtle smile which pervades all Leonardo's creations, that smile which is as elusive as it is potent, which never gives up its secret and never relaxes its fascination, that smile which is the very essence and soul of Leonardo's art. In lieu of this we have that haunting pathos, equally inscrutable and inimitable and the embodiment of an even higher beauty. This pathos is as pervasive in the art of Michelangelo

as is the smile in that of Leonardo. No matter what the theme or the occasion there is a hint of this sobering pathos in the background, a sympathetic reminder of the abiding pathos of existence. It is a pathos wholly unconnected with circumstance or happening. It is not grief for loss or sense of hurt. It is not the conscious appeal for sympathy expressed through a saddened countenance. All these are its counterfeits, shams wholly worthless in the service of art. The pathos of Michelangelo, a pathos which lurks under the smile of the sunniest countenance, is something which inheres in character, not in situation. It is at bottom only an inborn sensitiveness to that suffering which is inseparable from existence and a large capacity for sympathy with those who suffer. There is a sentence of George Eliot's to the effect that "the religion of the future must take larger account of that which, of all things, is best known to us, the misery of the human lot." Whether this be the thing that is best known to us or not, it is certain that those who have most felt the world's suffering and who have brought to it the largest gift of that sympathy which must ever be its chief alleviation, have been those whom the world has chiefly delighted to honor. Such a one was the Buddha and such the Christ; such was Savonarola and such George Eliot; and such was Michelangelo, the supreme representative of this consciousness and of this sympathy in art.

In the pathos of the Libyan Sibyl we have the completion of Michelangelo's definition of prophecy. We have seen its burden of responsibility, its absorption of body, soul, and spirit, its terrible inexorableness, and now its crowning, its divinest touch, pathos. How changed is that life which the first man received so eagerly, confronted so hopefully, so confident that it

promised only happiness and good! Life that was meant as a boon has been perverted and has become a bearer of suffering, too often a curse. The messenger of God's will to man, revolted and depraved, is the bearer of heavy tidings, of messages of reproof, too often of doom. The philosophy of the Christian faith casts its shadow over her beautiful face.

The sibyls illustrate better than any other works Michelangelo's procedure as an artist. They are sometimes spoken of as women. They are not women. They are female forms but emptied of all that is distinctively feminine and made the vehicle of wholly different ideals. What in essence is that "eternally feminine" which is the characteristic of woman? Our philosopher humorist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, has made a suggestive definition of the infinitely elusive thing. He admonishes that the woman who has failed to create about her, at least within a radius of a few yards, an atmosphere of charm, has missed the point of her being. True, eternally true, and a very large part of the truth we are seeking. Woman is the weaker vessel. If it ever comes to a test of physical strength there can be no doubt of the outcome, never has been, never will be. And as the counterweight to this physical superiority of the male she has received this inscrutable gift, this all potent weapon, of charm. It is no passive beauty, no symmetry of feature or form, but an outreaching spiritual force. A woman's smile; who does not know its power? A woman's icy repulse when she bids you know your place; better to face an army with banners.

Of all this the sibyls know nothing. They deploy no feminine arts, reveal no feminine consciousness. They know only their high commission, feel only its anxieties, its exactions, its terrors, and its sadness.

CHAPTER X

THE GENIUS OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL

The portion of the Ceiling thus far considered — the central panels and the sibyls and prophets ranged so commandingly along the sides — are the most prominent and in a way the most important part of the work. For this reason attention is usually limited to them. Yet if all these were obliterated the portion remaining would still be the most memorable painting in Italy. It would include more than a hundred figures, some of them of unsurpassable beauty and of the profoundest spiritual meaning. It is in these subordinate parts of the work, too, that the artist's mastery of painting reaches its highest development. Nothing is more surprising than the rapidity with which Michelangelo learned how to paint during the brief period in which he was engaged on this work. Had he accepted the commission with zest and a keen desire to master the art, progress would have been natural, but this we know was not the case. It was an art that he both misunderstood and disparaged. It is plain, however, that as the work progressed it revealed to him unsuspected possibilities and his insight and mastery steadily increased.

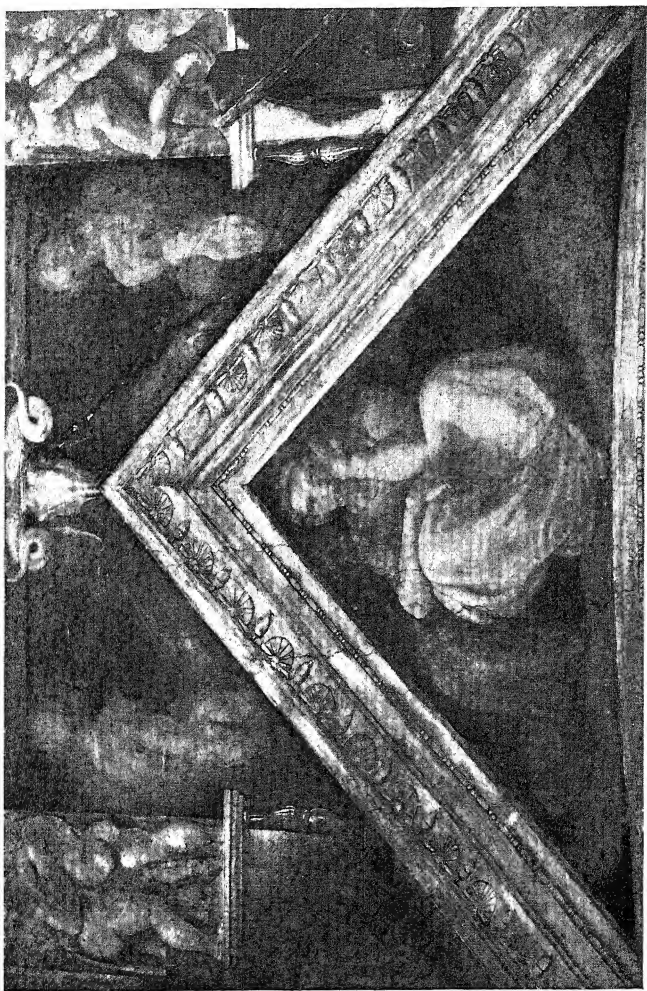
In nothing is the change more marked than in color. The world has been tardy in recognizing the artist as a master colorist. The Venetian type of coloring has rather imposed itself upon the general judgment as the standard by which color art is to be measured. There can be no question as to the eminence of the Venetians in this connection but it is not always recognized that

their use of color was only one of many and not necessarily the best. It was a use which subordinated form, and in a measure sacrificed it to sensuous effect. In this subordination they sacrificed not a little of the subtle intellectual and spiritual element, an element which in life reveals itself almost wholly through form, that is, through expression. It was precisely in this intellectual and spiritual element that the art of Florence excels, an element which her artists and above all Michelangelo would not sacrifice for any sensuous impression whatever.

But this does not mean that they were debarred from the effective exploitation of color. Some of them, to be sure, colored unbeautifully, conceiving and executing their figures entirely in form and then coloring them afterward much as a child does a book illustration with his box of water colors. Michelangelo's Doni Madonna is an example of this crude after coloring, crude and hard, and adding nothing to the art value of the work.

But if Florentine coloring is less sensuous and splendid than the Venetian it is, at its best, far more subtle and possibly even more harmonious. It is quite characteristic of it and perhaps its chief merit that you do not think of it as coloring but forget it in that enjoyment of the picture to which it none the less materially contributes. Carlyle tells us of two men one of whom was conscious of having an excellent constitution while the other said that so far as he knew he had no such thing as a constitution. He adds that it was the second man who had a good constitution. Similarly, Venetian art is conscious of its coloring; Florentine art is not. It does not follow that the Venetian better solved the problem of color in painting.

A recent writer has declared that the Sistine Ceiling is a color masterpiece comparable to the best Venetian

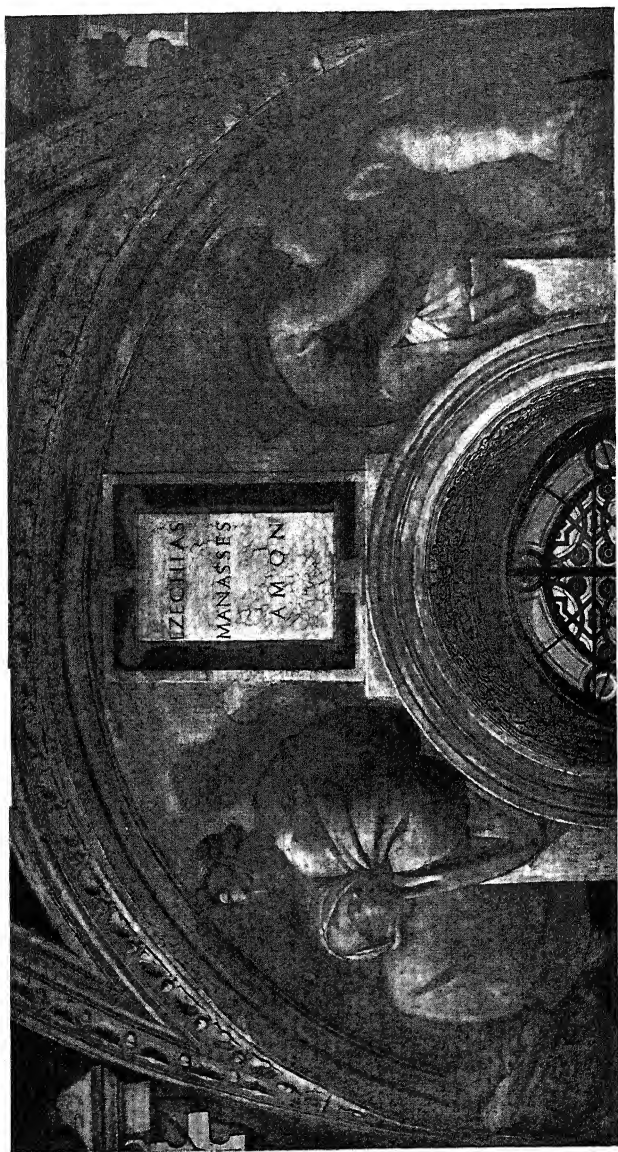


JESSE
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

painting. Comparable and yet so different in kind as to make comparison difficult. The soft pastel shades of fresco are less challenging than the rich, warm colors of the Venetians but they are capable of harmonies quite as exquisite. The soft flesh tones of the nudes, the carefully toned background, the pronounced but carefully harmonized colors of the draperies, are all united and blended by an infinitely subtle overtone of "diaphanous, violet blue," a color scheme unsurpassed in delicacy and originality.

Following the interruption of the work which we have noted, new innovations appear. Progress is now at an accelerating rate and the latest portion of the work, the little, triangular cross vaults over the windows and the half circles on the side walls beneath them, disclose a conception of painting so different from the sculpturesque manner with which he began that some critics have found it difficult to believe that the whole is the work of a single hand.

These vaults and half circles are devoted to the representation of the Kings of Judah and the ancestors of our Lord. Some of them are merely names to us, persons of whom nothing is recorded save their place in the genealogy. Even those whose reigns are chronicled in the Hebrew record are but shadowy figures scarcely emerging from the obscurity of that distant past. With trifling exceptions, therefore, the ancestors and kings appear, not as historic characters in whom we have a personal interest, but as impersonal representatives of that shadowy past in whose dim perspective men appear as trees walking. The theme was admirably adapted to the development of that suggestive style, that conjuring with shadow, which in the history of painting is associated chiefly with the name of Rembrandt, immortal



MANASSEH
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

interpreter of the somber moods of the spirit. Few painters have differed more widely in their conception of painting than did the Michelangelo of the earlier day and the great magician of the north. Yet in temperament, in artistic instinct, the two men were closely akin. They therefore instinctively gravitated toward that method of painting which best suited their common purpose, the expression of deep, unconscious pathos. An interior filled with shadow that deepens from half light into gloom, figures that half emerge into the dim lit foreground and others beyond, mere shades that scarcely detach themselves from the deeper shadows about, all these so familiar in the art of the great Dutchman now appear in the work of this unrecognized pioneer. The distant gaze, the bowed head, and the face concealed in the cowl contribute further to shroud personality in mystery.

The more we contemplate this later work of Michelangelo the plainer it becomes that he has but changed his means of expressing an unchanging purpose. There is an element of unfathomable mystery, of somber haunting suggestion in all his conceptions. In his sculpture this had found expression in attitude and facial expression. In his earlier painting in which, as we have seen, he remained essentially a sculptor, he still relied upon attitude and facial expression with results so wonderful that he almost reconciles us to his assumption that painting is but simulated sculpture. But he now discovers what the broad survey of human art so indisputably teaches, that the mystery of shadow is the natural counterpart of these spiritual moods and the medium best suited to their expression. This is not a mere convention of art but a fact based upon universal human experience. We are more influenced in our



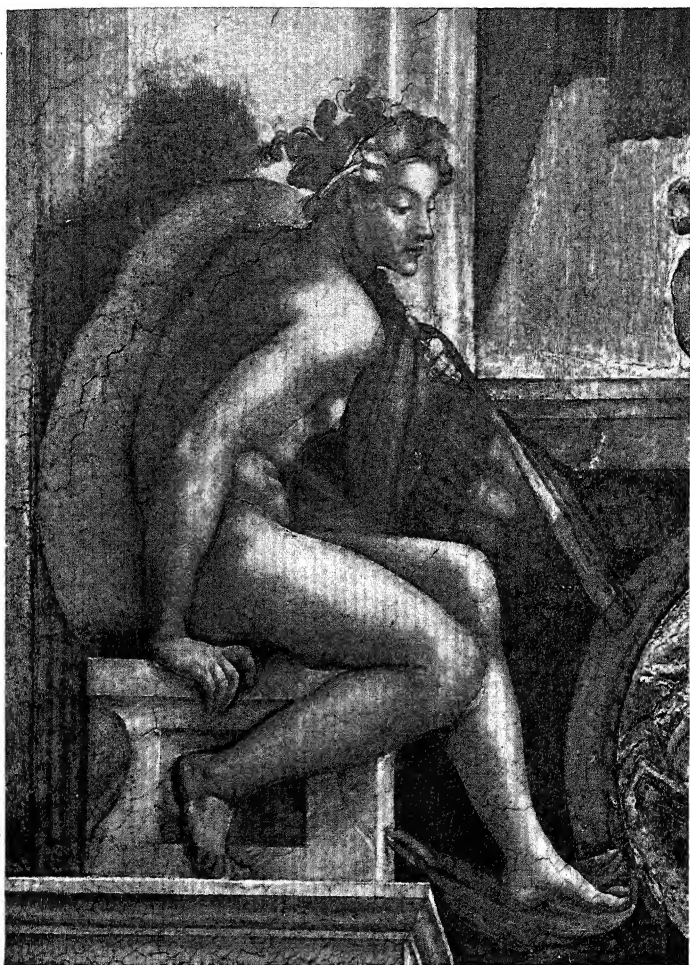
DECORATIVE FIGURE
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

emotions by the shadows than by the people that surround us. The devotional influence of the "dim religious light," the mood of pensive melancholy that steals over us when "the curfew tolls the knell of parting day," these are the commonest of human experiences. The art that can deal effectively with half lights and shadows has advantages for spiritual and emotional expression which are equalled only by music.

Whether Michelangelo ever came to revise his estimate of painting in the light of these, its unique possibilities, we do not know. Certainly he discovered and used them as no Florentine had hitherto done. In so doing he not only became a painter but an ultra painter shifting his interest and emphasis to those intangible elements which are wholly beyond the reach of sculpture and anticipating thus that development of painting which was to be the glory of another century and another people.

We have now to return briefly to a part of Michelangelo's earliest work upon the Ceiling, the so-called decorative figures that grace the sides of the central area and sit in the most varied attitudes at the corners of the panels of the Creation. These, while grouped with the Creation series, are logically distinct from it and since they form a significant group by themselves they are better considered independently. They are the only prominent figures upon the Ceiling which bear no names and so do not give us the usual clue to their meaning.

A clever suggestion is to be found in the garlands of oak leaves with which some of these figures are crowned and the clusters of acorns which appear in convenient spaces or crowd the cornucopias borne by others. These are the artist's only allusion to his great patron whose



DECORATIVE FIGURE

Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

family name, Rovere, is an Italian derivative from the Latin *robur*, oak. Not thus had complaisant artists been accustomed to recognize their distinguished patrons. In the neighboring Stanze Raphael has executed a series of frescoes in nearly all of which the most prominent figure is that of the contemporary pope, kneeling at the altar, riding on horseback, borne in his sedan chair, but always the observed of all observers dominating the situation. It is easy to see how this flattering personal notice distracts attention and sacrifices the spiritual unity of the theme. It was a sacrifice habitually made by Raphael and Titian, not to mention the lesser spirits upon whom the vision of the Most High rested but lightly. Can we for one moment imagine the portrait of a pope, even of a Julius, among these sibyls and prophets and in the presence of this Creator of the sun and the stars? The mere suggestion of such an impossibility reveals the immeasurable superiority of Michelangelo in this field of spiritual interpretation.

But Michelangelo was not unmindful of his debt to the stormy old pope whose inconstancy and passionate outbursts had caused him so many heartbreaking disappointments but who alone had measured his power, had given him worthy opportunity, and had protected him from the envy of his rivals and the malice of his enemies. In this unobtrusive manner he acknowledges the obligation. May we not believe that when the great pope first viewed the uncovered work and his gaze rested on these bunches of oak leaves and acorns the moisture came into that cold grey eye of his as it had never done before the blazoned walls of Raphael?

But if the meaning of these oak leaves and acorns is clear the figures themselves are still unexplained. They play no dependent or secondary part and their prominence

and remarkable beauty make it quite impossible to ignore them or to assign to them a mere space filling value. They have always challenged attention and prompted suggestions as to their meaning. Owing to the absence of names these suggestions have sometimes been surprising. They have been called athletes, a name apparently suggested by their nudity and physical beauty which we associate with the Greek athlete in life and in art. The name is weirdly incongruous, however, with the entire character and spirit of the work. One hardy adventurer has called them angels, a suggestion even more startling. It is true that the angel of Hebrew imagination was not the graceful, winged, female figure descended from the Greek Iris and Nike of Phidias and his successors. The angel was simply what the word originally signifies, a messenger, and as such a male figure quite devoid of extra-human appendages. Negatively these figures might qualify for the role of angels quite as well as for that of athletes. There is no reason why these nude youths should not serve as messengers were such service in demand. But equally there is no suggestion of such service and an appellation so startlingly at variance with the tradition of Christian art has little to recommend it. We may be quite sure that Michelangelo had no such thought regarding them. May we not for once grant the wish which the artist always feels that his figures may be taken for what they are, for what they themselves reveal quite uncomplicated by thoughts derived from other sources, history, literature, and the like? The printed page has become so incomparably more familiar and intelligible to us that we instinctively try to translate into its familiar vernacular all other forms of expression. "Who is it? What does it mean?" This is the instinctive demand of

the novice by which he means, not the real art meaning which is there plain before him, but a story or record which he can substitute for it and which has for him a more satisfying sense of finality and meaning. The clue to this pseudo meaning is the *name*; demanded by the public and grudgingly conceded by the artist. The meaning suggested by the name usually has little relation to that which the artist is intending to convey and if too exclusively regarded it may become an insuperable barrier to the perception of true art meaning.

Having therefore rejected the suggestion of angels and athletes let us refrain from further attempts of this order and take these figures as Michelangelo gave them, without name or other irrelevant suggestion, in the hope that we may see them as he saw them and may get the meaning that he sought to convey. What is that meaning?

In the broadest sense it is beauty. That is always the meaning of art and it is always meaning enough. And having started with this generalization we may continue with the familiar truth that the human figure is the most beautiful object in nature and a theme of abiding and perhaps of paramount interest in art. We may safely add, too, that the human nude in its unsullied purity, its possibilities of varied posture, of supple movement and languorous repose, has never been more adequately represented than in this wonderful assemblage.

But all this does not get us very far in our quest for Michelangelo's meaning. The human figure is not a constant but an infinitely variable thing, an instrument, as it were, upon which the music of beauty may be played in a thousand moods with as many possibilities of appropriateness or misadaptation. If it is vain to seek

enlightenment in such terms as athlete and angel it is equally unsatisfactory to assume that Michelangelo has scattered these figures about over the Ceiling with no other purpose than to indulge his skill in the representation of the nude and to fill vacant spaces with irrelevant beauty. Great art is a symphony in which every note plays its necessary part and all is written in the chosen key. The nude is the subtlest vehicle of spiritual expression known to art. There is no limit to its range of suggestion in the hands of a master. Changes too subtle for definition may shift the emphasis from joy to pathos, from passivity to assertion, from spirituality to voluptuousness, and so on through a thousand moods as varied as the music to be drawn from the strings of a violin. It is in the expression of these moods that art finds its harmonies and its discords. Mere anatomical correctness is a technical accomplishment but in itself it has no art value whatever.

That the Sistine Ceiling is a symphony written in a definite key the most casual observer will recognize. There is no monotonous uniformity of expression but there is harmony. Ezekiel is not like Jeremiah but both are prophets. Throughout the whole vast vault there is a dominant note, difficult to define but impossible to overlook, the pathos of existence, the solemnity of moral realities, and the majesty of the Most High. The scene with its fugitive high lights and its deepening shadows embraces earth and heaven and the drama unrolls itself through eternity.

Can we not perceive the almost limitless possibilities of discord in this accompaniment of the nude? Suppose, to take only the most obvious of these possibilities, that through misjudgment or inadvertence the emphasis had been placed upon sex. Can we conceive of the

dissonance that such a choice would have produced? There is no such dissonance. Not that there is monotonous uniformity of form, attitude, or expression. Indeed it would be difficult for variety to go farther. The most varied temperaments and moods find full expression. Yet there is harmony. All sing to the great accompaniment and all sing in tune. Michelangelo is unique among painters of the nude in his power of selective expression. Not all painters of the nude are as wanton as they seem. They are simply unable to represent the nude without arousing those ever present susceptibilities of sex which so easily dominate all other suggestions. By what magic is this man able to represent the nude without constraint and yet without ever exciting these susceptibilities? For the evidence is conclusive that his art conveys no such suggestion.

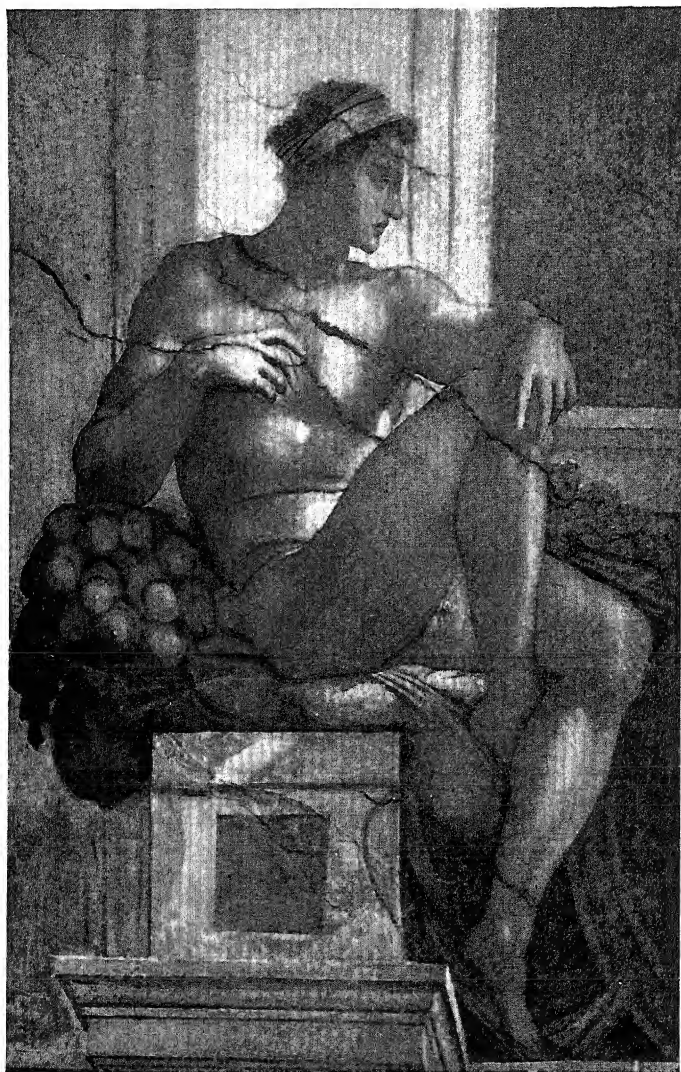
What is it that these figures thus rescued for purposes of spiritual suggestion, do in fact suggest? Perhaps we may find their unifying characteristic in temperament or character mood. If a name were required possibly "mood figures" would best serve the purpose. There is the mood of reverie; a delicate, dreamy figure, fit dwelling for a poet's soul. There is the mood of buoyant life, the joy of being alive.

"How good is man's life, the mere living! How fit to employ all the mind and the soul and the senses forever with joy!" There are others, difficult to define but impossible to mistake.

One figure invites more careful attention, a figure unique in beauty and significance, which may well serve as climax and symbol of the entire work. The youth sits half reclining, one knee upraised, the figure relaxed in perfect repose. The mind is unoccupied and given over to the unconscious sway of temperament. Nothing

is happening; nothing claims attention or prompts to action. He is left simply to be himself. It is a self of ineffable beauty and of deepest significance. A quiet sadness, too deep, too constant, too pervasive to penetrate into consciousness, lives about him, not the result of any happening to himself or others but an atmosphere in which all things happen. Ask him why he is sad and he will reply: "Was I sad? I didn't know I was sad." It is a sadness over which the lights and shadows of daily experience play unchecked. Meet him with your cheery "good morning" and he will return your greeting and your smile. Tell him your funny story and he will laugh with the rest. And when the smile has vanished and the laugh has died away he will relapse all unconsciously into that mood of haunting, inscrutable pathos which lives about him; nay! which is of his very essence. Probably no theme in art is so beautiful or commands a sympathy so universal as this type of personality which reflects the pathos of human existence and suggests that sympathy which is its only promise of alleviation.

Analysis contributes little to the understanding of such a character. Only intuitive sympathy deepened by long contemplation can evoke that response of feeling which is alone entitled to be called understanding. This understanding once attained, however, we gradually become aware that this is but the purest expression of a spirit which pervades Michelangelo's entire creation. This figure is spiritually identical with the beautiful Libyan Sibyl, the noblest of that wonderful group. Under disguises of accident and circumstance it is the spirit of Jeremiah, of Isaiah, of the anxious Delphica and the terrible Cumaea. It is the spirit of the Sistine, the spirit of Michelangelo.



DECORATIVE FIGURE
Ceiling, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

May we not seek for a figure so supreme, so representative, a name which will help us to recall it and the better to appreciate its nature.

In the Vatican near by is a little figure, pure as the driven snow, whose serenity recalls the influence of the great Praxiteles. It has won, we know not how, the name, "Genius of the Vatican." With better warrant we may remember this beautiful figure which so reflects the spirit of the great Ceiling and mirrors the soul of its creator, as the Genius of the Sistine Chapel.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAGEDY OF THE TOMB

The Ceiling was completed in late October, 1512. Michelangelo was then thirty-seven years old, of iron constitution and of unprecedented power of application and sustained effort. He had still fifty-two years to live during practically all of which he retained his health and his capacity for creative work. His reputation as an artist was established beyond cavil and even the most questionable features of his powerful influence were congenial to the spirit of the age. His services were in constant and exorbitant demand and he was occupied to the end of his life by commissions such as only an age could offer in which the largest revenues in the world were lavished upon art production. Yet in all this period he brought almost nothing to completion and in spite of fragmentary achievement which equals and even surpasses the Sistine this whole half century bears the stamp of tragic failure. For lavish outlay upon art does not always mean the service of art nor does recognition, patronage, or even idolatrous acclaim imply understanding or true appreciation.

Who was responsible for this failure? The temptation is strong to attribute it to unintelligent patronage and perversity of circumstance.

“Man dwells apart but not alone.

Among his peers he walks unread.

The best of thoughts that man has known

For lack of listeners were unsaid.”

Certain it is that at critical moments the listener was lacking. It seems certain, too, that the most cherished of his projects, the one to which he clung most tenaciously through long years of disappointment and rebuff, was also the noblest, the one which might best have found expression. It is easy to see in the changed spirit of his later work the effect of resentment against this thwarting of his noblest ambition. It is possible, however, that this explanation is superficial and that these baffling conditions were rather the pretexts than the causes of a development predestined in his nature. Had the choice been ever so free and the listeners ever so sympathetic it is possible still that the fairest of his harmonies would have been those of his youth.

The Sistine Ceiling is beyond doubt the most remarkable example of sustained, high pressure execution in the history of art. Several influences contributed to this result. The incontinent pressure of the Pope, anxious lest he should not live to see it finished, has been mentioned. Political developments in Florence gave the artist additional reason for haste. The Medici, long in exile, were now trying to recover their position by armed force against the bitter hostility of the Florentines. That Michelangelo, despite the favor shown him by Lorenzo, shared this hostility is certain. Had he been free to leave his work he would almost certainly have returned to fight for the liberties of Florence. But the Pope, hostile though he was to the Medici, had no mind to risk his favorite artist in a military adventure. The patriot artist could only quicken his feverish haste and hope to finish in time to be of service. It was not to be. On August 29, a few weeks before the completion of work, the terrible sack of Prato, a Tuscan city near Florence, with the massacre of its inhabitants,



MOSES
S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome

broke the resistance of the Florentines and the Medici re-entered the city for a brief period of ascendancy.

But more important than either of these was the hope and the promise that with this work out of the way he might be permitted to resume the work which to the end of his life he looked upon as his life work and supreme opportunity. Colossal as was the labor involved a young man of thirty-seven in good health and with a power of sustained execution already demonstrated in the Sistine, might reasonably hope to carry it to completion.

We do not know whether the Pope shared these hopes or intended to resume the undertaking. Some things lead us to believe that the project, at least in its original form, had ceased to interest him. But the matter soon passed beyond his jurisdiction. A stricken man when the Chapel was formally opened on November 2, he died in the following February and the brief period that remained to him was filled with matters of graver import than the vanities that had once absorbed his attention. He was oppressed by the consciousness that he had been a great sinner and was more concerned to commend his soul to God than to recall his memory to posterity. The Tomb was not forgotten but the directions given breathe the spirit of humility rather than of ostentation.

Whatever the thought of the dying Pope there can be no doubt that Michelangelo clung tenaciously to the project and regarded it as the task in hand. Under a new agreement with the heirs of Julius we find him intermittently at work for the next two or three years upon statues destined for the great monument. It is clear that the inspiration that had never failed him during the long task of the Ceiling was still unabated.

Indeed it is in the work executed at this time that his art reaches its culmination. That work consists of three statues, the Moses and two figures variously known as "Bound Slaves" or "Dying Youths," one of the latter too unfinished to require serious consideration. Only three out of the projected forty-nine and only one of these ultimately graced the Tomb of Julius.

The Moses, designed, it is said, to be one of twelve colossal statues representing the characteristics of the Pope, is remarkable example of the ideal in art. The ideal in art is nothing else than the *idea* in art. Art may represent either an idea or an individual. The individual is not an idea but a complex of many ideas which more or less obscure or neutralize one another. To make the individual represent an idea he must be modified and simplified, certain elements being suppressed and the desired idea brought out by emphasis. This simplification may be much or little, subtle or bold. There is something of it in every good portrait. The subject must stand for something significant, something which in life he perhaps expresses only rarely, but something that is legitimately his. To this end the meaningless and commonplace are excluded and the significant emphasized. We never like the portrait unless this is done.

When, however, we set out to represent a quality or idea through the medium of either a real or a fictitious person the process may and does go much farther. In this case the proposal was to subdivide the personality of Julius into twelve parts and to represent each by a statue, obviously an extreme application of the principle of simplification. We have no idea what the other eleven characteristics would have been or how Michelangelo would have expressed them but we can be in no doubt as to the one here represented. Quite inevitably

Michelangelo has seized upon the Pope's most salient characteristic, his impulsiveness, his tendency to translate impulse into action without the intervention of reflection. Moses was the traditional representative of this character. The man who, descending from the mount, flung down the tables of the law and broke them to pieces when he saw the people given to idolatry was certainly the prototype of the Pope who could beat a bishop for a maladroit remark and order the demolition of St. Peter's because it offered no place for the tomb that pleased his fancy.

The statue is the pitfall of the academic critic who sees in art only the correct and properly proportioned representation of the human figure without regard to further purpose. He tells us that the proportions are wrong, that the head is too small, too low-browed and short from front to rear, that the organs of sense are exaggerated, the beard preposterous, the torso too heavy, and the draperies are caught up over the knee in quite impossible folds. Yes, the veriest tyro can see all that, could perhaps correct it all, and in so doing he would make a Moses that would have no meaning relevant to his purpose.

To express the sensation which passes directly into action without the intervention of thought Michelangelo has emphasized the organs of sense and reduced the cranial capacity. The heavy beard is popularly associated with strong passion. The figure is marvelously dynamic. He is sitting but not resting. The weight is thrown forward and the left foot drawn backward and placed just where it is needed when he springs from his seat as we feel he will do in another instant. Yet despite this dynamic intensity, this terrific assertion that another second will realize, the figure is restrained and

marvelously compact, the ideal of a stable sculptural composition. The enthusiastic comment of Rodin that "you could roll that thing down hill and not break off any essential part" is high praise unconventionally expressed.

The striking feature of the horns, originating long before in a mistranslation of the Hebrew account, was already traditional in representations of Moses. Michelangelo finds it not unsuited to his purpose. The horn is a frequent Hebrew symbol of aggressive power. "I will raise up unto Judah a *horn* of salvation," that is, a powerful and aggressive deliverer, is a typical example. The suggestion is appropriate to the characteristic of Julius which he is here representing and the horns are used with expressiveness rather than with tolerance.

The Moses is closely akin in spirit to the prophets of the Sistine. The resemblance to the fiery Ezekiel in particular has often been noted. On the other hand the note of tender pathos which characterizes the Libyan Sibyl and the "Genius of the Sistine Chapel" recurs in unsurpassable beauty in the Dying Youth, now in the Louvre, Paris (see Frontispiece). All that is suggested in these figures from the Sistine is here embodied in a form more delicate, more refined, more elevated, more transcendently, ineffably spiritual. The judgment of Herman Grimm, pre-eminently a devotee of Greek art, may here be quoted without qualification. "When I say that to me it is the most elevated piece of statuary that I know, I do so, remembering the masterpieces of ancient art."

The statue is one of a group variously interpreted as bound slaves representing the provinces conquered by the Pope and as dying youths symbolizing the arts expiring with the death of their great patron. The bond

which passes under the arms suggests the former explanation and leads to tempting if doubtful inference. What pathos this lover of liberty sees in this conquest and enslavement of the free cities of Italy! It is not certain that Michelangelo sanctioned either interpretation. This beauty of pathos appealed to him as beauty in its highest form — as indeed it is and as appropriate to the Tomb. It is we who feel the need of translation. If the forty-nine statues originally planned for the Tomb were to be of the character of these two what a loss the world has suffered through the inconstancy of human affairs!

Had the work been continued at this time the Tomb would have lost nothing by the four years' interruption. The Sistine would rather have served as a preparation to ripen and mature the artist's thought. Alas, it was not to be. The artist's fame was his undoing and the living snatched him away from the service of the dead.

Unfortunately for the great project the Papacy at this time recognized no continuing obligation in matters personal to individual popes. The tomb of a pope was the concern, not of his successor but of his family. The Papacy had become the perquisite of a few powerful families among whom there existed the intensest rivalry, not to say hostility. When at the death of Julius the succession passed to the Medici, bitter rivals of the Rovere, it was a foregone conclusion that papal revenues, the only revenues capable of financing so vast an undertaking as the Tomb originally contemplated, would not be devoted to the magnificent project.

There followed a new contract with the heirs of Julius, then a second, a third, and finally a fourth, each reducing the scale and changing the character of the great project. Painfully the work dragged on with constant



TOMB OF POPE JULIUS II
S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome

interruptions, delays, and compromises, the Rovere pleading, demanding, threatening, the artist explaining, excusing, promising, yet both yielding to an autocrat they dared not offend and who unhesitatingly set the wishes and the rights of both at naught. For twenty years the struggle dragged on, years of frustration, of hope continually deferred and thwarted, until at last the tragedy was consummated in the fourth and last contract which contained the all important provision that Michelangelo was released from further personal work. The Tomb was to be completed by assistants working under the supervision of Michelangelo.

That such a contract should have been accepted by the Rovere and by Michelangelo can only mean that after years of frustration they had come to recognize the realities of the situation. Michelangelo was no longer a free agent and could not dispose of his services at will. Each Pope had projects of his own and cared little for those of his predecessor. Michelangelo had begged at every opportunity to be allowed to resume work on the Tomb. He had even considered leaving the papal dominions and continuing the work abroad under the protection of the Rovere family. But the Pope's arm was long and his will not to be resisted.

Whatever the necessities of the case there can be no question of the fatal weakness of this final contract. No great artist ever lived who had so little power to direct the work of others as Michelangelo. We have noted his inability to use the work of assistants on the Ceiling in whose voluminous architectural details if anywhere it would seem that assistants might have been employed. We have seen that no smith could temper a cold chisel to his satisfaction and that he did all such work for himself, surely the limit of uncooperability.

It is equally certain that no assistant ever assimilated even approximately his manner and spirit. He was one of the inimitable, the great inimitable of all time.

The result of this arrangement was as might have been expected, a pitiful failure, a melancholy caricature of Michelangelo's great design. A single statue, the famous Moses, is wholly his. Two others, the Leah and Rachel, of much later origin, are in some sense attributable to him, either finished by him or executed from his designs by assistants who followed his sketches as they were able. It is difficult to see in the tame suavity of these rather characterless figures any trace of the terrible energy and the restrained but unfathomable passion which the Moses and the Dying Youth have made familiar and which characterize with ever increasing intensity the Medicean Tombs and the Pietà in Florence. Beyond these figures there is neither appearance nor tradition of the great sculptor's influence. Few designs in Italy are so bungling and helpless as the architecture of this tomb and the effigy of the great Pope is the very bathos of the Renaissance. It is evident that Michelangelo realized the hopelessness of the proposed collaboration and being busily employed elsewhere allowed matters to take their inevitable course.

It is difficult to avoid the problem which has fascinated posterity as to who was chiefly responsible for this tragic failure which Michelangelo justly characterized as the "tragedy of the Tomb." The Rovere do not seem to have lacked interest or to have grudged expense. On the financial side they seem to have had just cause of complaint. Michelangelo can hardly be suspected of speculation but he was unbusinesslike and expenditures were disproportionate to visible results. There are hints of stormy scenes but we are chiefly im-

pressed by the forbearance of these ill-used patrons and their patient acceptance of the inevitable.

Posterity has shared the reluctance of contemporaries to hold the great artist amenable to the rules that govern ordinary men. The world is indulgent to those who are privileged to look behind the veil and tell us of the infinite. It is difficult to define in terms of contract either their activities or their obligations. We are indulgent lest we clip the wings of inspiration. Despite this wise leniency, however, there has been found among the unsympathetic — for such there have always been — an occasional critic who lays the blame upon the artist himself. To his ebbing enthusiasm, his growing moodiness, his too great readiness to interest himself in other and alien tasks, is assigned the responsibility for the tragic outcome.

There is truth in these criticisms. To say that Michelangelo was temperamental and subject to emotions which he did not always control, is, however, little more than to say that he was an artist of the emotional and hence of the inspired type. He was undoubtedly moody and it is clear that his moods became more somber and that the sense of futility and hopelessness increasingly characterizes his later creations. Probably that is the inevitable development of the profoundly emotional temperament to which art owes so much. But to those who study the circumstances of his life, his continual disappointments, the repeated interruption of his plans and the dictatorial assignment of unwelcome tasks the wonder is that anything of courage and hope remained. That Michelangelo did not resist these interferences, this dictation, was due to one of the deepest characteristics of his nature. Though one of the most independent and self sufficient of men, neither his life nor his art

ever betrays the spirit of defiance or revolt. Always pathos, always tragedy, but never rebellion. "I feel he laid the fetter. Let it lie." Those who would have him refuse new commissions while the old were pending forget that these commissions were tendered by an autocrat whose request was tantamount to a command. The well-known reply of Paul III when Michelangelo resisted his entreaties alleging his contract for the Tomb, is enlightening. "It is thirty years that I have cherished this desire, and now that I am Pope, may I not indulge it? Where is the contract? I mean to tear it up!" What could an artist do who was subject to a Pope who had absolute power and who did not scruple to use it in furtherance of his personal ambitions? That Michelangelo gradually became interested in the commissions thus forced upon him is surely not to his discredit. That these unsought commissions eventually diverted his attention entirely from the art of his choice and into a channel less suited to his genius is only a part of the great tragedy.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the responsibility for the tragedy rests where tradition has placed it, with the Popes and chiefly with Julius himself. It was he who set the evil example of interrupting the work at the moment when spiritual conditions were in rare conjunction. It suited his convenience to employ the artist upon other and unwelcome tasks. Why should not inspiration be obedient to papal authority? Why could not the artist do the work just as well some other time? The fugitive character of artistic inspiration was apparently unknown to him.

The successors of Julius merely followed his example. The Medicean Leo X, nowise interested in glorifying the rival house of Rovere, forced a revision of the con-

tract and constrained the artist to undertake the construction of a façade for the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence, the burial place of the Medici. The Tomb waited while Michelangelo built roads in Carrara, cut great blocks of marble from the mountains and moved them to Florence, the while his chisel began the task of releasing from the marble those giants, destined to a prominent place in his grandiose design, whose half disengaged forms are now in the Academy at Florence. Steadily the work progressed. Then, for reasons unknown to us, the Pope suspended the project. The work of years was wasted and San Lorenzo still waits for its façade.

But the Tomb gained nothing by the change. Deaf to his entreaties his Medicean masters released him from one task only to set him at another more arduous and more odiously Medicean. The Laurentian Library, the New Sacristy, and the somber, enigmatical, Medicean Tombs now occupy him intermittently for fifteen years while enthusiasm ebbs and opportunity recedes ever farther into the uncertain future. They are years not only of reluctant toil but of war and defeat and bitter humiliation which slowly poison the fount of inspiration. At last with the death of Clement VII the house of Medici passes and Michelangelo drops his chisel and leaves his beloved Florence forever.

It is a changed Michelangelo that returns to Rome at the call of Paul III. More than a score of years have passed since he finished the great vault of the Sistine and unchained upon the marble that furor of inspiration which gave us the Moses and the Dying Youth. He is sixty now, chastened, disillusioned, embittered. His pathway is strewn with the wrecks of abandoned projects, projects in which his best years

have been spent but which he seems to have left without regret.

Without regret save for one. Once more he begs to be allowed to return to his work on the Tomb of Julius. We know the Pope's reply and the insolent remark of the cardinal that the Moses was monument enough for Julius. Dead men have no standing in this court of warring ambitions. The contract is again revised, the Pope guaranteeing that the Rovere shall content themselves with three statues from the master's hand, and he begins — in what spirit we can imagine — to paint the Last Judgment.

Bitter as was the artist's disappointment at this decision we may accept it without regret. Could the project have been carried through to completion twenty years earlier when the mood which produced the Moses and the Dying Youth completely dominated the artist the result would have been above all price. Nothing in the art of the Renaissance, perhaps nothing in the art of the world, would have surpassed such a work executed by his hand and inspired by that spirit. But these conditions no longer existed. The skill, indeed, remained; had in a sense increased. The painter of the Last Judgment could do things of which the painter of the Ceiling never dreamed and these were precisely the things most prized by this sophisticated, technique loving age. Michelangelo was still the master. Men recognized it; he knew it. Change seemed progress, not decadence. Nor had his creative power declined. Forms innumerable, vast, somber, awe-inspiring, still came thronging at his bidding. Indeed the most moving of all the creations of his spirit still slumbered in the marble from which it was to be released but in part by the palsied hand of extreme old age.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST JUDGMENT

This great composition which occupied Michelangelo intermittently for the next six years, is an astonishing work. Its mere size — it is the largest single composition ever executed — would make it a memorable achievement. It covers the entire west end of the Sistine Chapel, two windows having been built up and three frescoes by Perugino, part of the series previously noted, having been destroyed to make room for it. The actual surface covered by the Ceiling is larger but this space is divided by conventional architecture into numerous small areas each of which is treated as a unit. This reduced the problem of composition to comparatively simple terms. A few figures, usually not more than two or three, had to be accommodated to limited and feasible spaces. The manner in which this was accomplished is above all praise but the task was not superhumanly difficult.

In contrast the present project called for something like a tour de force. A space out of all proportion to the size which could be plausibly assigned to the human figure, a theme which required an enormous number of figures and permitted no division of the space, and finally, an exacting demand that orderly arrangement should be reconciled with and subordinated to naturalness and spontaneity, made a combination of incredible difficulty. It is to be feared that under the conditions

prevailing at the time this difficulty was somewhat prized for its own sake and that the praise accorded to Michelangelo in this connection rests more upon the technical skill manifested in overcoming it than upon the intrinsic value of his creation. Be this as it may, there can be no doubt as to his skill or the completeness of his triumph. The number of figures is enormous and their grouping in a composition which dispenses with the aid of artificial divisions or setting is a marvelous combination of spontaneity and order. This subtlety of composition is easily overlooked by the novice, the more so as it has been obscured and the color harmonies quite destroyed by later changes that we have soon to consider. The paramount impression is that of a countless multitude moving each as he will, unconscious of discipline or order. But a glance at Michelangelo's sketch now preserved in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence reveals the fact that order and rhythm pervade the composition, the better, according to the ideas of the time, because submerged and concealed by the dominant sense of spontaneity. The demand for order and rhythm was quite as exacting as in the days of mediaeval symmetry, but the desired arrangement should be unconscious, accidental. The grouping should just happen. If the spectator is not conscious of artistic arrangement, no matter. He is not supposed to be conscious of it as a thing apart. He is supposed to feel it, and feel it he does, however unconscious. As thus conceived the Last Judgment is one of the world's supreme triumphs.

Even more noteworthy than its composition is the extraordinary development of that suggestive style of which we have noted the beginnings in the latest work of the Ceiling. Of all themes this called most imperatively for suggestion to supplement representation.

Large as was the space at his disposal only an infinitesimal part of the innumerable company awakened by the last trumpet could be represented upon it. Somehow these few must be made to suggest the innumerable company. This is accomplished by the device, since become familiar, of having the rear ranks fade out in progressive indistinctness until the most remote become mere hints so faint that they suggest rather the limits of our vision than the finiteness of the throng. The illusion in this case is perfect. The few score figures that we see are multiplied by the imagination to the countless myriads that come trooping out of the unknown in response to the angel's summons.

So complete is Michelangelo's mastery of suggestion here that critics have been tempted to forget its novelty. One speaks with enthusiasm of this art as peculiarly "Michelangelo's own," apparently forgetting that he was a sculptor and that his characteristic manner as a painter was sculptural, his figures being essentially statues and as such quite incapable of this use of suggestion. Only in the latest stages of the painting of the Ceiling had this use of suggestion appeared, and the intervening years had offered little or no opportunity for its further development. It is certainly a tribute to Michelangelo's grasp of his art that he so mastered this latest innovation as to betray the critics into accepting it as his natural manner.

It is unnecessary to take up in detail this remarkable work, to note the completeness with which the subject has been grasped, the multitude of its allusions, and the cleverness of its portrayal. All this has been done with a thoroughness rarely vouchsafed to a single work. We are concerned rather with the essential character of this epoch making work as related to Michelangelo's development

and influence. An epoch making work it certainly has been. [To an almost incredible degree it has influenced later painters, tempting them to imitation and shaping their ideal. It was through the Last Judgment and not through the Ceiling that Michelangelo's influence made itself felt upon the art of the following century.] Throughout this century and even beyond, that influence was supreme, not only upon the art of Italy but upon the painters of the north who, in the seventeenth century snatched away the laurels so long worn by the Italians. Men of the most divergent temperaments and alien allegiances were under the spell of this colossal work which they were unable to emulate but could never forget. A Rubens might kneel on the grave of Titian and swear a solemn vow to paint like Titian all his life, but when he painted his much lauded Descent from the Cross he was thinking of the Last Judgment. It was a work that once seen simply refused to efface itself from the painter's imagination.

Just why the work exercised this fascination we need not inquire. It exercises no such fascination today nor are there many even among the devoted admirers of Michelangelo who do not deprecate its influence. It is one of the paradoxes of history that the most inspired of artists should have exercised the most baneful influence on art. Why? The answer must be sought in the character of this work through which this influence was chiefly exerted.

The multitude assembled for the last assize were originally represented wholly in the nude. Considering the place and the function of the building the fact is a little startling. Conceding to the utmost the legitimacy of the nude in art there are few who would consider it appropriate for every situation and perhaps it will be

conceded that it is as little suited to chapel decoration as anywhere.

Yet now that we raise the question we recall that this use of the nude is nothing new. The Ceiling has been there for more than twenty years, its most prominent figures the nude youths in whom we have been tempted to see the culminating spiritual beauty of the work. It is with no studied intent that we have passed our whole review of the Ceiling without alluding to its nudity. We did not think of it. No one ever does. The unsophisticated observer, as is well known, is somewhat sensitive to the nude in art and especially in religious art. Even the well-bred libertine has his sense of decency as regards time and circumstance. But strange to say the nudes of the Ceiling have apparently escaped criticism from the first. By a magic which is his own secret the artist has given them a pure beauty which is free alike from sex suggestion and from mere physical carnality. The nude thus emancipated, idealized, becomes the subtlest vehicle of spiritual expression that we know. The most unsophisticated instinct at once recognizes its purity, its spiritual character. The nudes of the Ceiling seem never to have evoked criticism.

Not so the nudes of the Last Judgment. The story told by the local guides as a cheap witticism has a significance usually overlooked. While the work was in progress and nearing completion the Pope who was viewing the work with Messer Biagio, his Master of Ceremonies, is said to have asked the latter what he thought of it and the latter replied that "he thought it highly improper to expose so many naked figures in a sacred picture, and that it was more fit for a place of debauchery than for a Pope's chapel." Michelangelo resented the criticism and replied by representing Messer

Biagio, quite unmistakably portrayed, in Hell. Messer Biagio naturally took offense and complained to the Pope who replied with more humor than sympathy: "If he had put you in Purgatory I might have helped you but in Hell you are beyond my power."

The laugh was evidently on Messer Biagio and it ends with a sneer at his prudery. But was Messer Biagio a prude? He was standing at the moment under those nudes of the Ceiling which he had seen a hundred times apparently without repugnance. These were different. With a sound instinct he sensed the difference and felt these later nudes to be out of harmony with the associations of the place. Nothing in the story warrants the conclusion that Messer Biagio was prudish.

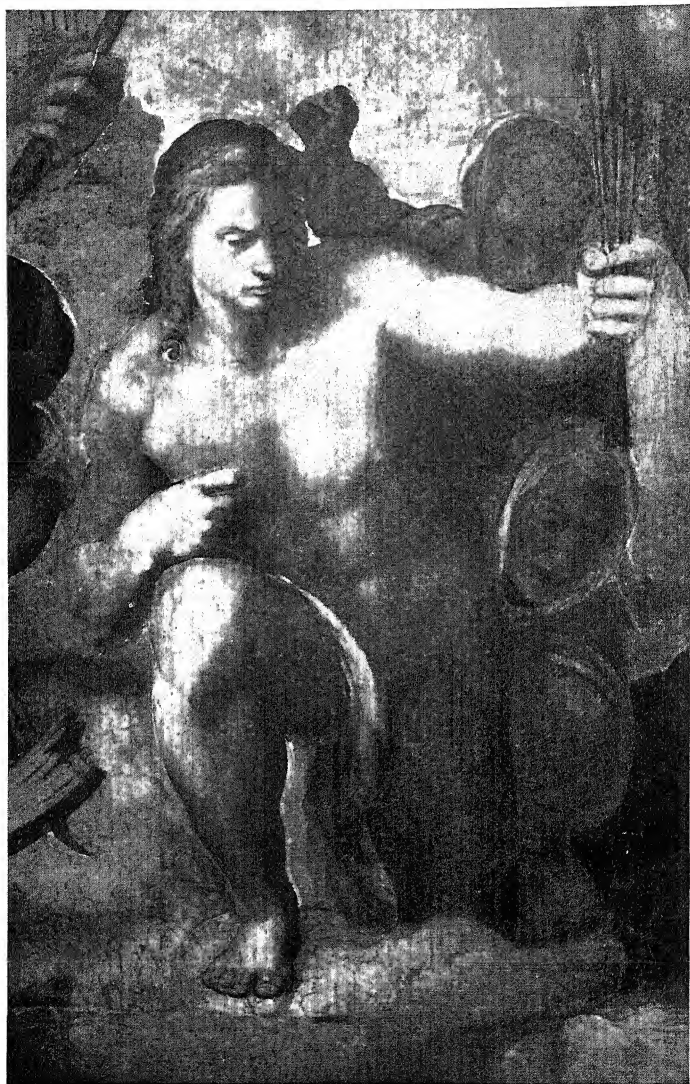
In the sequel the laugh was on the artist rather than on his critic. Whatever may have been the Pope's sympathies and his reluctance to interfere with the artist upon whom he had so precarious a hold, the criticism was not to be ignored. There can be no question that Messer Biagio spoke for a large number who found the nudes offensive. The age was not oversensitive and the license of art was great. But if morals were indulgent there was a sentiment of decency in its indulgence. If conscience was silent, good taste could still protest.

It is in the light of this protest of good taste that another incident acquires a meaning that is usually disregarded. This is the scurrilous letter of Pietro Aretino, that conscienceless blackguard, who, after exhausting every device to wheedle out of Michelangelo some work from his hand, protests "as a baptized Christian" against "an impiety of religion only equaled by the perfection of his painting." The blasting criticism which follows usually excites in the reader only indignation at the

impudence of a rascal like Aretino addressing such a reproof to Michelangelo. But Aretino was the cleverest scoundrel of his age. He would not have ventured such a criticism if he had not known that these opinions were widely held. The sting of his abuse lay in that fact.

It is perhaps appropriate to note here that Aretino's criticism was not only malicious but in one respect profoundly unjust. He clearly insinuates that Michelangelo's nudes are not only inappropriate but indecent, that is, lewd, deliberately appealing to sex susceptibilities. No artist ever lived who has been less open to that criticism than Michelangelo. Sex indulgence seems to have found no place in his life and to have made no appeal to his imagination. The nudes of the Ceiling are no more suggestive of sex than the horses in a horse race. It is possibly true that nudity simply as such has its sex suggestion to the ordinary mind unless dominated by a powerful spiritual antidote, and in this sense the Last Judgment may be open to this criticism, but of conscious pandering to sex susceptibility there is nothing. And that this charge should have come from an Aretino!

Paul III was not sensitive to such considerations nor was he inclined to affront the painter by interfering with his work. To do so, indeed, with the painter's reputation such as it had become required a hardihood that few men possess. It is clear evidence of the persistence and possibly of the intensification of this criticism that a later Pope, while the painter was still living and the most revered of all figures in Rome, commissioned another painter to paint draperies on the most offensive figures, a proceeding that met with such approval that it was later extended to other figures until the general character of the work was altogether changed. That the artist should have been consulted with regard to



ST. SEBASTIAN. (Last Judgment)
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

these changes and should have acquiesced shows the deepening sense of world weariness and indifference that — already manifest in the Last Judgment — took ever more complete possession of him as the years went on.

Whatever may be our sympathies we can not ignore the atrocious nature of this proceeding from the technical and artistic standpoint. To begin with, dry painting on top of fresco is technically quite inadmissible. The two techniques are entirely different and they produce results which will not coalesce or harmonize. But this is the least of the objections. Artistically such a revision is simple desecration. If we wish to understand its true character we have but to imagine it applied to the nude youths of the Ceiling. It is of a piece with the draping of the Apollo Belvidere with a scarf or a loin cloth which is the laughing stock of art circles. No doubt there is a real problem, now as there was then, but this is not the solution.

The matter was made worse by the choice of an inferior artist, Daniele da Volterra, for the task. His coloring, never felicitous, was wholly incompatible with that of Michelangelo whose color harmony, be it remembered, was one of the great charms of his art. The extent of this overpainting was sufficient to give to the work as a whole a sickly greenish cast utterly at variance with everything that we have from Michelangelo's hand. Let us hope that the artist never entered the Chapel after this impossible transformation.

What, then, was the ground of these criticisms? The answer is somewhat obscured by the changes mentioned above, but not all of the work was repainted and the disguises are after all not such as seriously to obscure the character of the original. The nude still dominates the composition and in much the same character as at the

outset. The attempt to conceal the offensive was neither intelligent nor altogether successful. The objection is not local but pervasive and the contrast, so generally felt, between the earlier and the later work is still patent to all observers.

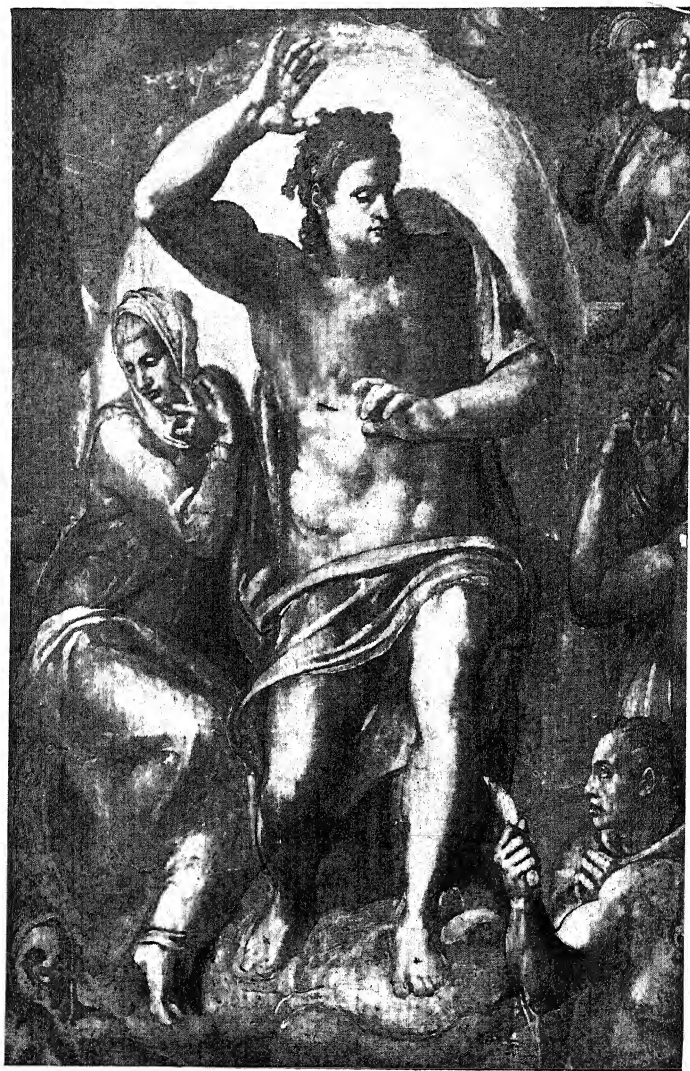
The first thing that strikes us is the enormous muscular and physical development of the nudes. These figures have been described as "over developed gymnasts." They hardly suggest the gymnast at all. They are prodigious, beefy, quite too heavy for efficiency in any line, athletic or other. The contrast with the trim, lithe figures of the earlier period is wholly to their disadvantage as representing either physical perfection or average human reality. No assemblage of creatures such as these is thinkable under conditions actual or ideal, and if encountered it would be repulsive as burying under its mountain of flesh all suggestion of either mind or soul.

This brings us to a second and more important characteristic, one which is perhaps more or less a corollary of the first but which has its independent significance. This is almost total absence of spiritual interpretation. This word is used not in any conventional or religious sense but simply as representing the psychic, as contrasted with the physical factor in interpretation.. It is well to remember that we have moved very far from the sixteenth century in our ideas of what is suitable for representation in painting. Psychological studies of character or mood as depicted in the human countenance are now disparaged. To the modern painter human beings are essentially physical objects in a world of physical objects and valuable like trees or stones in a general composition. Psychological subtleties are left to poets and philosophers. Probably this decision is

right. The objective is more suited to pictorial expression than the subjective and every art does well to play from its long suit.

But art had reached no such conclusion in the sixteenth century. Psychological subtlety was the aim of the painters almost without exception and perhaps the most accepted measure of their success. It was and still is the criterion which determines the pre-eminence of Michelangelo and the rank of his contemporaries. What are Mona Lisa, the Dying Youth, the Christ of the Last Supper, if this spiritual or psychic factor be ignored? There are those who persist in ignoring it and in judging the works of this period by their composition, modeling, color scheme, etc., the criteria of present day art. Such judgments have a certain interest but they do not lead to understanding. Let us judge Michelangelo by the standards of his time, standards of which he was one of the foremost exponents.

It is doubtful whether the human imagination has ever conceived a theme which offered larger scope for the psychological factor than this of the Last Judgment. The contrast between felicity and woe, each raised to the *nth* power is of its very essence. Imagine the dramatic possibilities of this assemblage of all human kind to be rewarded according to the deeds done in the 'body, some with felicity unimaginable as they stand, "all rapture through and through in God's most holy sight," and others banished from his presence to torments too terrible to contemplate. What do we get if we omit this rapture and this terror? Had not the unknown painter of two centuries before strained his utmost powers to represent upon the wall of the Campo Santo of Pisa this contrast? With what devout earnestness did dear old Fra Angelico a century later struggle with



CHRIST THE JUDGE. (Last Judgment)
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

the same theme! How seraphic are the blessed who wander in the flowery fields of Paradise; how agonized and despairing those whom the demons are hustling off to their doom! Altogether inadequate are the powers which they bring to the interpretation of this super-humanly emotional theme. It awaits the deeper insight of a truly psychological age. What might not a Leonardo make of such a theme? Nay, what may we not expect from the creator of the Jeremiah, the Libyan Sibyl, the Dying Youth?

Let us not be misled by any repugnance we may feel for the subject, for the theology which it represents or the theory of art which it implies. These were of the age, recognized, accepted and unchallenged. The felicity of the faithful and the doom of the rebellious were the foundation upon which rested the church and the structure of Christian society. It was this theme that was assigned to Michelangelo, a theme which we have every reason to believe was congenial to him.

His failure — for we can use no lesser word — may be illustrated by certain prominent figures which are fairly representative of the whole. Such are the two colossal figures which stand as focal centers of the two contrasted groups. They are of the heavy, carnal type already noted, forms not easily spiritualized at the best, but forms which imperatively call for some contrast relevant to the theme. They present no such contrast. The figures could be interchanged without the slightest disturbance of spiritual equilibrium in the whole. If they have distinctive character at all they both belong among the goats. Imagine either of them thrilled with rapture in the presence of the Most High! Even more incredible is the figure of the Christ. Conceive the problem of representing such a character in such a role!

How imperative some reminiscence of sacrificial suffering, of love, of reluctance to pronounce the dreadful doom! An impossible combination, if you will, but one that we would like to see a Leonardo attempt. Michelangelo has not ever made the attempt. A figure unthinkable for the Christ and unplausible even for an average human, a face devoid of spiritual suggestion or of any significant expression, a gesture without dignity or apparent relevancy borrowed from the Pisan painter of two centuries before, make up this amazing travesty by the noblest artist upon the most stupendous of spiritual themes.

The kneeling figure of the Madonna offers the usual opportunity for compensating spiritual suggestion. Even this opportunity is doubtfully improved. A face of pure classic beauty but icy cold betrays no hint of that tenderness and compassion which, however inappropriate to the theme, are indispensable to her character.

It may perhaps be argued that in this incompatibility between the theme and the character which Christian tradition assigns to its actors lies the explanation of the spiritual emasculation which characterizes the work. Would that we could find in this a sufficient explanation, that we could see in this failure merely a demonstration of the unpaintableness of such a theme and could believe that the soul of the artist was unperverted as of old. It is with profound regret that we dismiss so welcome a hypothesis. Michelangelo had changed. A world weariness, perhaps the inevitable doom of a nature thus emotionally endowed, but precipitated by continual disappointments and thwarted endeavors, had taken possession of him. The fountains of his earlier inspiration had dried up and life had become arid, for arid indeed is the life that has lost inspiration and hope

and has to content itself with cleverness and skill. This is decadence, its very essence. That decadence was visibly approaching in the busy world of art, but nowhere so deplorably as in the work of the greatest artist. Yet it remains as puzzling as it is regrettable that it should have taken with Michelangelo the form of gross materialism, of physical heaviness and exaggeration.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MEDICEAN TOMBS

In following the history of the Tomb of Julius through to its tragic conclusion we have passed lightly over a period of some thirty years. This period was not uneventful but was filled with important undertakings to which we must now return.

The new Pope, Leo X, was very different from Julius. The second son of Lorenzo de' Medici, he had been destined to the service of the Church from his earliest youth and all that the wealth and power of the Medicean House could do to secure his preferment was forthcoming. Assuming that the highest honor which the Church could bestow would be his, every effort was made to prepare him worthily for it. His education was the best that the age afforded and his proficiency was highly satisfactory. Nor were character and morals neglected. Lorenzo's letter of instruction to the son as he was about to face the temptations of the Papal court is a model of paternal wisdom and solicitude. Judged by the standards of the time he made good. A cardinal at the age of seventeen and Pope at thirty-eight he acquitted himself creditably from the first. He was able, learned, cultured, and fairly exemplary in his life. But he embodied the culture rather than the piety of the time and was indolent, luxurious, and self indulgent. His remark on learning of his election: "Since God has given us the Papacy let us enjoy it," is characteristic.

For some time Leo did not claim Michelangelo's services. It is said that he disliked him. They were of

the same age and had known each other as youths in Lorenzo's household. From what we know of both we may assume that this relationship did not draw them together. So the artist was allowed to finish the Moses and the Dying Youth and to advance several other works of uncertain destination well toward completion.

But in the third year of his pontificate Leo visited Florence which he had left more than twenty years before. He there conceived the idea of a façade for San Lorenzo, the beautiful church of Brunelleschi and the mausoleum of the Medicean family. The plan once decided upon, designs were called for from various artists including Michelangelo and his plan was accepted.

We do not know whether his participation was voluntary or constrained. If voluntary it gives color to the criticism that he scattered his energies. But it is all but certain that he was requested (that is, required) to furnish a plan, his fame being such as would hardly allow him to escape. The immediate result was a commission to build the façade and, alas, a new contract, executed under pressure of the Pope, for the Tomb of Julius reducing its scale and necessarily postponing its completion. Whatever interest Michelangelo may have felt in the new commission must have been offset by this sacrifice of his most cherished ambition. What would have been his feeling had he known that he would never again strike a blow for its realization?

There now followed a period of three or four years (exact dates are lacking) devoted to the new project. Most of this time was spent in the menial work of quarrying and even in opening up a new quarry and building roads. It seems incredible that a man who had made the Pietà, the Moses, and the Dying Youth should have been allowed to waste his time on such tasks.

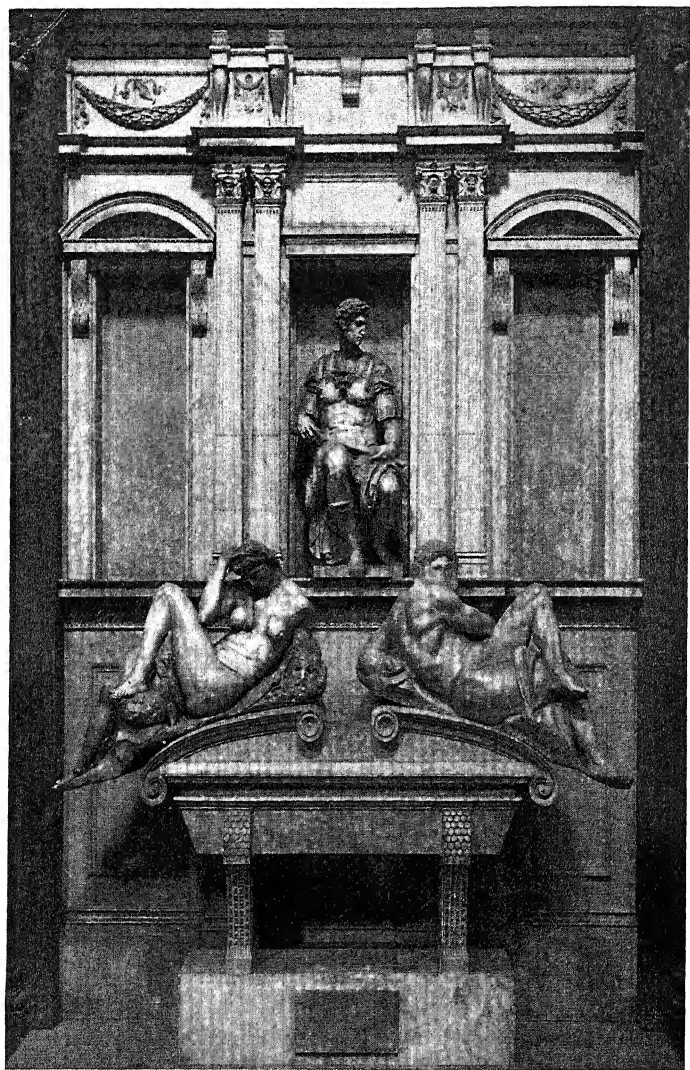
Perhaps his inability to use the work of other men was at fault. He was probably as exacting about the quarrying of his marble as about the tempering of his cold chisels. Be that as it may, he found little time for the direct exercise of his art. Work was begun upon a number of colossal figures evidently intended to be a part of the façade but while they were as yet but partially roughed out the Pope, for reasons that we can only surmise, dropped the project and the four years work came to nothing.

What did Michelangelo think about it all? We are not told. He had doubtless gotten sufficiently interested in the undertaking to feel impatient at the Pope's fickleness and vexed at the waste of his time. But if he could now have returned to the task of his choice he would doubtless have welcomed the decision. Unfortunately he had no such compensation. The Pope had another task ready for him. Indeed it was probably his interest in the new undertaking, the building of a mausoleum for the Medicean family in connection with the Church of San Lorenzo, that induced him to postpone and ultimately to abandon the other undertaking.

We are less interested, however, in the Pope's reasons than in the result. How much have we lost by this change of plan? San Lorenzo, of course, lost its façade. The most beautiful church in Florence, it alone among the city's unfinished churches of that day still remains unfinished. This, however, concerns us but secondarily. Has the world lost a masterpiece from the hand of Michelangelo as in the case of the Tomb of Julius? In the absence of plans and with nothing to guide us save the unfinished figures above referred to which are now preserved in the Academy in Florence we can come to no certain conclusion. These figures, however, if

intended for the façade as seems clear, imply a conception of doubtful appropriateness. The figures crouch wearily and almost painfully under a burden whose character we can only surmise. Apparently they were to bear substantial elements in the architecture itself, performing the work of columns or piers. Such use of sculpture is familiar but always questionable, and the character given to these particular figures was not such as to reassure us. They appear weary and crushed by their burden. It is difficult to avoid the suggestion that Michelangelo was as yet much more of a sculptor than of an architect and that he conceived his façade too much in sculptural and too little in architectural terms. It may be doubted whether a façade more or less built of statues in the manner of the later Baroque would have added to the beauty of the church even if from the hand of Michelangelo. Possibly the Pope thought so too, but this is the merest guess.

It has been noted that the Church of San Lorenzo was intimately associated with the Medicean family. Cosimo, the grandfather of Lorenzo, had been buried by exceptional honor and contrary to precedent in front of the high altar. Piero, his son, was buried in the Sacristy, his tomb, the masterpiece of Verocchio, occupying about the only eligible place. Now that the family had attained both to supremacy in Florence and to the honor of the papacy its members might reasonably aspire to sepulture in San Lorenzo. For this, space must be provided. Hence the decision to build a new sacristy which was to serve solely as a family mausoleum. This was built by Michelangelo in 1520 and following. It is simple and not uncomely but is of interest chiefly as the first in that series of architectural undertakings which culminated in St. Peter's. Even weighted with his name

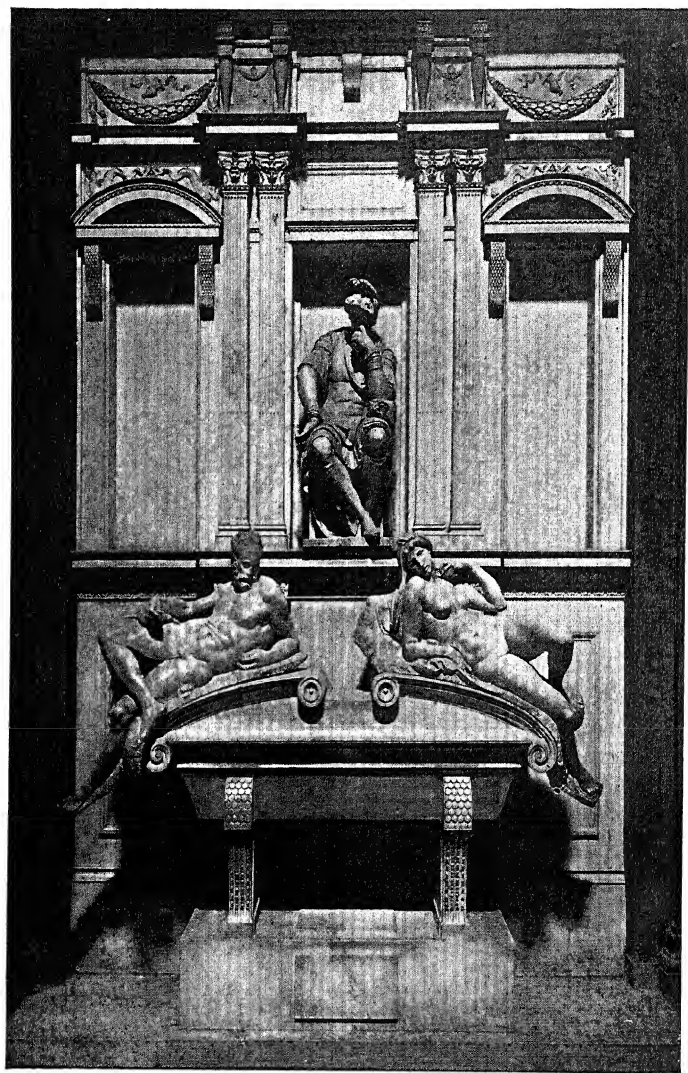


TOMB OF GIULIANO DE' MEDICI
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

it is doubtful if one visitor in a thousand would turn aside to see it were it not for the sculpture from his hand which it contains. For in this case there is no blending of architecture and sculpture. The architecture is unostentatious, a mere shelter for the tombs which it was Michelangelo's task to execute.

The tombs begun and largely executed by Michelangelo are those of Giuliano, Duke of Nemours, and Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino. Giuliano was the third son of Lorenzo the Magnificent and therefore a younger brother of the Pope. Lorenzo was the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent and therefore the Pope's nephew. Both had had a varied experience in the tumultuous political life of the time and the Pope in accordance with the customary nepotism of the time had used every resource of the papacy for their advancement. Both had met an untimely death, Giuliano at thirty-seven and Lorenzo at twenty-seven.

Before turning our attention to the tombs it will be well to look at the situation once more from the artist's standpoint. The work of four years with its slowly developed interest had been thrown away. His plea to be allowed to return to the Tomb of Julius had again been denied. His patron was one for whom he had no sympathy and who had no real appreciation of his work. He must at this time have become deeply pessimistic as to his further career. Nor was there anything in the character of these satellites of the Pope to inspire enthusiasm. It is sometimes claimed that the artist is independent of such considerations and doubtless some are, but it can hardly be doubted that the personality of Julius inspired Michelangelo, and the later history of these very tombs supplies the strongest evidence that personal relations influenced his work.



TOMB OF LORENZO DE' MEDICI
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

But all these conditions became much worse as the result of outside happenings. The work was hardly well under way when the Pope died. There was a brief puritanical pontificate of less than two years and then the election of another Medicean pope, Clement VII, an illegitimate cousin of Leo. He pushed the Sacristy and held the artist to the task while assigning him another architectural commission, the Laurentian Library, built to house the priceless collection of books and manuscripts gathered by Cosimo and Lorenzo. Then came disaster, the sack of Rome, an almost incredible barbarity, and following in its wake the expulsion of the Medici from Florence and the restoration of the republic. For a brief two years the dream of popular liberty continued and then a treaty between Pope and Emperor restored Florence to the Medici, a decision which the Florentines accepted only after a long and bitter struggle.

Michelangelo's sympathies in this struggle were not doubtful. Medicean tombs were at a discount and all work on them was discontinued, doubtless with no thought of resumption, while the artist as military engineer of the Republic, drew plans for fortifications and superintended their erection. The slumbering hatred of this old follower of Savonarola for these destroyers of Florentine liberty was awakened. It was in vain. Florence yielded to superior force and the artist was peremptorily sent back to his task.

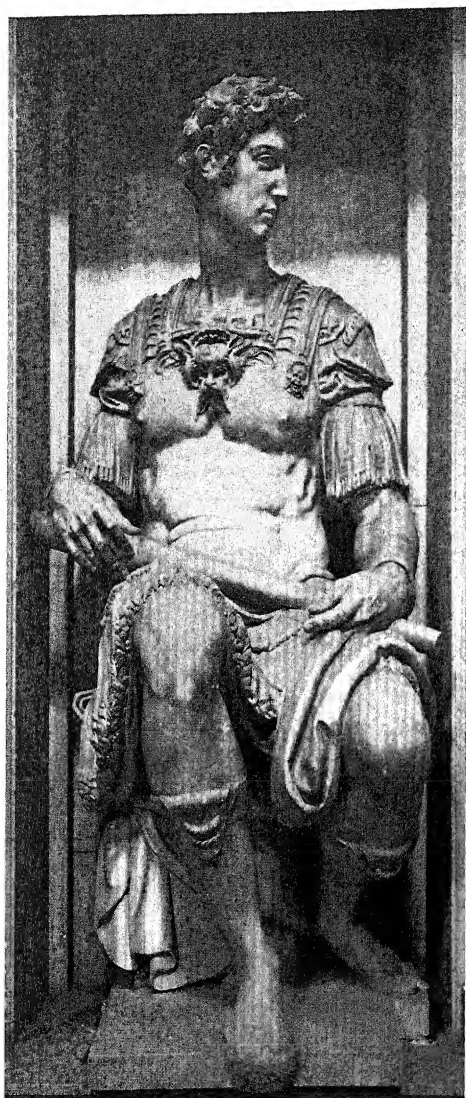
The crowning ignominy came a year later when the Pope placed a Medicean bastard of the lowest type, son of an uncertain Medicean father and of a mulatto mother, in control of Florence. A monster of cruelty and lacking in every redeeming trait, he saw in Michelangelo only a political enemy whom he would have sacrificed unhesitatingly had it not been for the protection

vouchsafed him by the Pope. It was under such a master that the artist was driven back to the hated task.

It is but fair to say that Michelangelo did not devote himself very loyally to it. He worked intermittently and some of the time upon other commissions. He was occasionally at Rome and even began there the cartoons for the Last Judgment (originally a project of Clement VII) which he was later to execute under Paul III. There can be no doubt that he would gladly have taken up almost any task which would have released him from the hated obligation but Clement was unrelenting. The most celebrated artist in the world was not to be released from the service of the Medicean family. For fourteen years the work dragged on until in 1534 Clement died, and Michelangelo, long since a legal citizen of Rome, dropped his chisel and left Florence never to return save with pall and bearers.

The sculptural figures which were to adorn the tombs were well advanced toward completion. The so-called figures of Lorenzo and Giuliano were finished and one of the ideal figures essentially so. All were sufficiently advanced to reveal their final character, lacking little more than the high surface finish which Michelangelo was accustomed to give to his work. But the central structure, the sarcophagus and its supports, had not been begun or its character indicated. Upon this structure depended the disposition of the figures and this in turn had a large bearing upon their character as art.

Michelangelo did not say, and probably did not know, that he was leaving Florence forever. He had made other trips to Rome and had returned, so now they awaited his return. But the Medici had lost control and their successors were nowise minded to send



GIULIANO DE' MEDICI. (Detail, Tomb)
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

him back to work for their unloved rivals. The Florentines, groaning under the tyranny of a Medicean degenerate, were equally indifferent. Least of all was Michelangelo himself minded to return. He both feared and detested the bloodthirsty Allesandro whose hatred of the artist for his part in the war against the Medici was well known. How profound must have been the alienation which could induce him, at the age of fifty-nine, to leave in hopeless incompleteness a work upon which he had spent fourteen of the best years of his life!

As he failed to return there were hints, reminders, petitions, that he should resume the work. Whether these were met with a refusal we do not know but he did not return. When at last the great tasks assumed in Rome made it clear that no resumption was possible he was urged to furnish plans or sketches by which another could complete the work according to his intentions. The request was reasonable and he may have been not unwilling, but he did not, probably could not, furnish the plans. It was a characteristic (and a weakness) of Michelangelo that he worked without definite plans save in his own mind. Even as architect of St. Peter's he furnished to his subordinates only drawings of detail reserving to himself the task of co-ordination, a method satisfactory for him but embarrassing to those who were obliged to continue the work after his death. To have furnished the detailed plans required for the guidance of another in the present instance would have been well nigh a psychologic impossibility. In any case none were furnished and the later sculptor was left to his own devices.

It is significant of the honor in which Michelangelo was now held that no attempt was made or permitted



LORENZO DE' MEDICI. (Detail, Tomb)
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

to finish the statues he had begun. No spot that had felt the touch of his chisel was ever touched by another, however strong the temptation. Only the sarcophagi were designed and executed and the block of uncut marble on which the statues rested hollowed out to fit them. This much was done without his warrant and this determined the pose of the figures, a fact vital to our judgment of them as art. It is just possible that Michelangelo would have made a different use of the figures and so given a different character to the tombs, but it is not likely. It is difficult to see how the figures could have been used in a way materially different from that chosen and their startling position accords with their psychologic or spiritual suggestion. While recognizing this element of uncertainty we may assume with little risk that we are contemplating the work of Michelangelo.

The tombs as thus completed are not only unprecedented in character and arrangement but they are in startling contradiction with both the practice and precept of Michelangelo. Three criticisms are commonly and plausibly directed against them.

The first is that the seated figures above the tombs which are assumed to represent Giuliano and Lorenzo are not portraits. Extant portraits make it clear that Michelangelo quite disregarded the appearance of these men with whom he must have been personally acquainted.

More serious is his complete and needless sacrifice of stability in the ideal figures which adorn the tombs. Marble is heavy and brittle and the sculptor should so employ it as to reassure us against any uneasy feeling that it may fall or break. The rule requires relaxation when motion or action are represented, but in every case

the pose should be one that can be reasonably assumed and maintained. When no action is indicated the figure should be as reposeful as possible. Michelangelo had perfectly exemplified this principle in the *Pietà*, perhaps the most perfectly stable group of sculpture in existence, and even in the dynamic *Moses* whose compactness and restraint was to win the praise of Rodin. Yet the figures upon these tombs, though representing neither action nor gathering impulse, are sliding off into the abyss.

There is a third peculiarity which cannot long escape the observer. There is a subjective discomfort and unrest manifest in these figures which it is impossible to reconcile with stability or repose. Were the physical pose ever so stable this mental disquiet would disturb it.

Taken together these peculiarities give to these tombs a character difficult to reconcile with the accepted principles of sculpture but profoundly suggestive of the conditions under which they were executed. Let us consider these criticisms briefly in turn.

First, we may recall that Michelangelo did not make portraits. The statue of *Julius*, long since destroyed, was the one serious exception. It seems clear that he had a poor opinion of portrait as art. Despite his incidental realism he was absolutely an idealist in art. He used the human figure not as a subject in itself but as a medium for the expression of what he deemed to be important things. It irked him to express mere individual accidents. It is of course possible to make portrait serve the purposes of idealism as Rembrandt and others have shown, but the artist is far freer when dealing with the ideal figure.

This explains why these figures are not portraits. But if they do not represent individuals do they in fact

represent something else? Assuredly yes. If we can stop thinking about them as representations of Lorenzo and Giuliano they are meaningful enough. The one is care free, sensuous, and concerned only with the interest of the hour. The other, the face shadowed by the helmet and inscrutable even in the clearest light, is the embodiment of reflection, of mystery, well expressed in the popular name, *il Pensiero*, the thinker. To a man who lived under the rule of Alessandro de' Medici and who remembered the days of Savonarola, how mysterious was the course of human affairs, how inscrutable the ways of Providence! How contrasted, too, the types of those who accepted the change from the one to the other with never a thought for aught save their daily pleasures and their daily bread and those to whom the mystery and the tragedy of existence was alone of concern! Not that Michelangelo thought it out in words like this or in any other. That is not the artist's way. These contrasted figures rose before his imagination and appealed to him, he knew not why. But conditions, political and spiritual, surrounding him at the time were the occasion of these imaginings and were reflected in them.

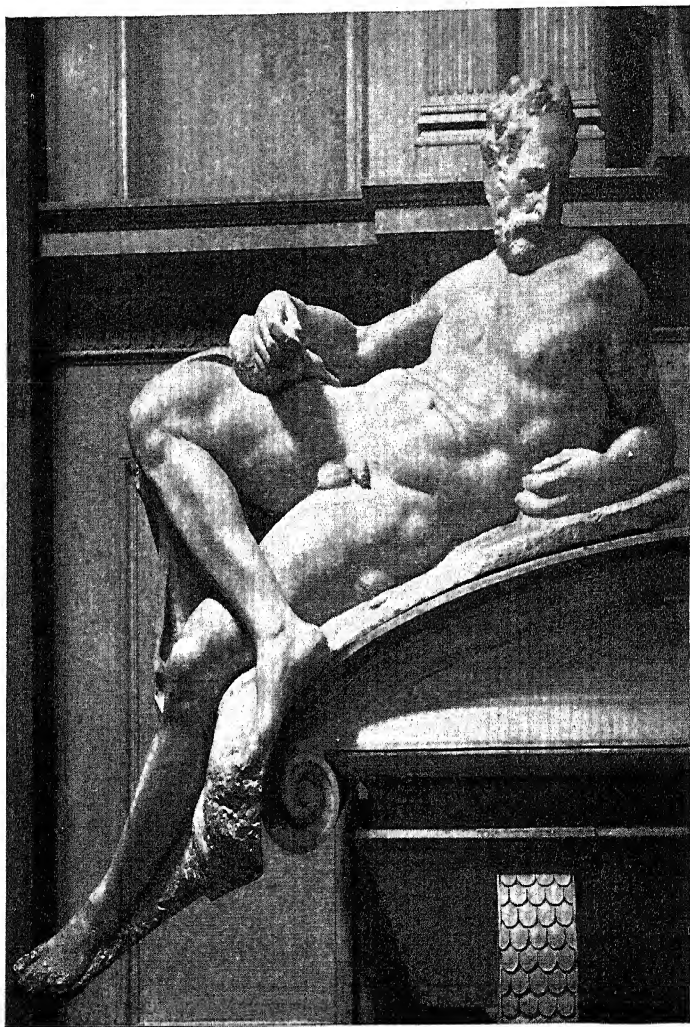
The astounding instability of the figures that recline upon the sarcophagi, particularly those upon the Tomb of Lorenzo, seems less easy of explanation. We realize at a glance that unless they were held in place by some unseen fastening they would instantly slide off their sloping seat and fall crashing to the floor. Why this flagrant violation of a principle upon which he had previously insisted and to which he was later to return?

We may dismiss at once the suggestion that this was sheer defiance, the deliberate sabotage of a project undertaken unwillingly for patrons who did not

command his loyalty. So petty a motive can hardly have controlled the labor of fourteen years. Nor is the character of the work such as to warrant this assumption. No more painstaking work ever came from his hand or work more profoundly informed with deep and sustained emotion. All the signs of great sculpture are here, but sculpture which ignores the limits usually imposed by art.

Yet in a deeper sense the explanation is to be found in the untoward conditions under which he labored. Michelangelo was a deeply emotional man. Petty reactions to temporary hurts cut little figure in his art but long standing experiences of disappointment and frustration, not only in the exercise of his art but in the developments, social, political, and religious, in which he was interested, produced in a nature originally somber, a profound and morbid pessimism. There can be no question that his imagination painted the future of Florence as well as his own in the darkest colors. This somber mood, this sense of futility increased steadily throughout his life as we may see if we view in succession the *Pietà*, the *Dying Youth*, the *Medicean Tombs*, and the *Descent from the Cross*, milestones along the way that he traveled for more than sixty years.

The present period was undoubtedly the most unhappy of his life. He had worked unwillingly upon the Sistine but fired by a great hope of what lay beyond. He was young and his demonic energy was at the flood. His patron was a kindred spirit. Now he was old and the future held no promise. He was working for a tyrant whom he feared, for a pope whom he disliked, and for a family against whom he had fought in vain. Never had his future been so hopeless, his work so uninspired, his time so wasted as now. No possible

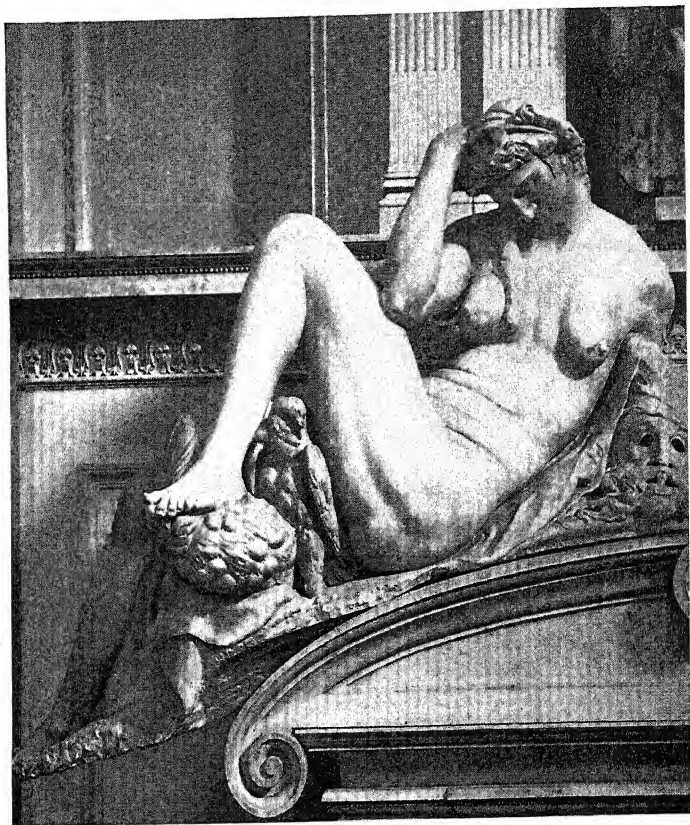


TWILIGHT. (Detail, Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici)
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

appraisal of the Medicean Tombs can see in them fourteen years work of a supreme genius.

Michelangelo's mood reflected these conditions. Never was his outlook so dark, his heart so unreconciled, his mood so somber as now. This mood of emotional protest, not to say insurgency, craved a more violent means of expression than the canons of art afforded. Suppose we had asked Michelangelo: "Why did you who made the *Pietà* and taught us, as never a sculptor before, that sculpture must maintain 'integrity of mass' and stability of form, make these sprawling figures that are sliding into the abyss?" How the old man might have turned upon us and replied: "Is not everything sliding off into the abyss? Do you see stability in the rule of the Medici in Florence or in Rome? How can I express through observance of the laws of art this subversion of the laws of God?" The words are ours but the mood which they suggest may well have been that which dictated his strange procedure.

Let us turn for a moment from the material to the spiritual. Again we might have asked: "Why have you tortured these figures to their sore discomfort? Not one is in an attitude of repose. Not only are they slipping from where they rest but their posture is one of gratuitous discomfort. This exquisite figure of Night purports to be a sleeping woman. Could a woman sleep with her head in that position? And how would her neck feel when she awoke? How long would her elbow rest upon her leg if she fell asleep? Why this distortion, this discomfort?" Can we not anticipate the passionate reply: "Do you then lie down to pleasant dreams in this our Florence? Is not sleep a torture? Are not your dreams nightmares and your waking worse than your dreams?"



NIGHT. (Detail, Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici)
New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, Florence

On this point we are not left to conjecture. The story is familiar of the visitor who called upon Michelangelo in his studio and finding him out, expressed his admiration for the beautiful figure of Night in a charming quatrain which translates as follows.

"Night that thou seest here sleeping in so graceful an attitude was carved from stone by an angel. And since she sleeps she is alive. Dost not believe it? Touch her and she will speak to thee."

A graceful tribute, surely, appreciative and sincere if not wholly discriminating. Another artist would have smiled with pleasure at the compliment. Not so Michelangelo. Accustomed to express himself in verse he wrote his reply beneath the visitor's lines.

"Well for me that I sleep while shame and wrong endure around me. For me not to see, not to hear, is great good fortune. Therefore wake me not, I pray. Speak softly."

Tolerably bold words, these, if we remember that a blood-thirsty tyrant and assassin ruled Florence and was distinctly hostile to the artist. How long was it before those words were repeated in the Medicean palace? What meaning would Alessandro see in the words: "shame and wrong endure around me?"

But we are little concerned with Alessandro's enmity or Michelangelo's defiance. Our interest in the incident is its revelation of the mood in which the artist worked at this time. It is not fanciful to see in this mood the explanation of his extraordinary license. Nor is it difficult to see in that mood and in the conditions which produced it a certain justification for his procedure.

Let us not be deceived as to the nature of the liberty that he has taken. Michelangelo has deliberately

violated the most fundamental laws of his art, laws that inhere not in the taste of a locality or of a period but in the unescapable conditions under which he works. He has burst the barriers of wholesome restraint which keep art from extravagance, folly, and madness. In so doing he has expressed with profoundest poignancy the emotions which filled his soul, emotions for which the art of sculpture under its normal restraints was inadequate. Sculpture is one of the noblest but one of the most restrained of the arts. Can anyone imagine the passion of a Lear effectually expressed in sculpture? Yet it was a comparable emotion that now craved utterance and strained at the leash.

Thanks to this bursting of bonds they have found utterance. Emotional expression has at times been more boisterous, more theatrical, but never in the whole history of art has it been more intense. The figures of Night and Day upon the Tomb of Giuliano, the one sunk in unquiet slumber like an opiate that deadens pain, the other turning in recoil from the daylight that it fears to face, are unsurpassed in intensity of utterance and definiteness of suggestion. The figures of Morning and Evening Twilight upon the other tomb are their only rivals. The man who in painful weariness is subsiding into unconsciousness and the woman who stirs apprehensively in the moment between sleep and waking exhaust the possibilities of pathos in art. In comparison with these the beautiful Dying Youth seems almost placid and smiling.

While we can not question the depth and sincerity of the artist's feeling or the adequacy of its expression we may still ask, what is the value in art of the expression of these extreme moods. The question admits of no positive answer. To some the subject is uncongenial

and the liberties taken in its expression unjustified. To others this self revelation of a rare spirit, this aloofness from a truckling and degenerate age, this defiance of tyranny and refusal to serve its ends, all this is the supremely beautiful thing, the ultimate value, and no sacrifice too great in the interest of its expression. Those whose moderate emotions find adequate expression within the normal limits of art naturally see in the ignoring of those limits a trespass, a sin against art. Souls of greater sensitiveness and deeper passion will see in this overriding of limits not the perversion of art but its supreme triumph. Did Michelangelo violate the laws of art or transcend them?

Whatever our decision in the present case it will be agreed that the place in art of such moods as are here expressed is limited and that the license here permitted should be reserved for rare natures and exceptional experiences. Unfortunately this limitation was not to be observed. The great artist's deliberate violation of the laws of sculpture were the sensation of the age and petty spirits that never knew a great emotion found in it a warrant for unbridled license. Upon the Medicean Tombs more than upon any or all other works rests the responsibility for the extravagance of the baroque sculpture.

Our interest in the problem presented by the tombs tempts us to pass too lightly that which is, after all, their supreme claim upon our attention, their sculptural perfection and ineffable beauty. The visitor to Michelangelo's studio mentioned above seems not to have noticed the peculiarities which have troubled the critics and have occupied so much of our attention. He stood entranced in the contemplation of that perfect figure and the pure beauty of that exquisite face. Let us



MADONNA AND CHILD
New Sacristy; S. Lorenzo, Florence

leave her presence with like recognition of that which really matters.

Over against the Tombs and in striking contrast with them stands the unfinished group of the Madonna and Child. The motive is the same, physically and spiritually, as that of the youthful Madonna of the Stair wrought forty years before. Again the child is at the breast. There is the same privacy, the same unconsciousness of surroundings, the same far away direction of thought, above all the same quiet pathos, only deeper, more intense as befits the changed conditions. But here is no uneasy pose, no slipping off into the abyss, no unreconcilment of passion with fate. Pathos, not the fruit of experience but the essence of life itself, has the calm of all accepted things. All is stable and in repose. Such was the spirit of Michelangelo, even in his most tempestuous moods, when dealing with what were to him the eternal things.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST MESSAGE

The Last Judgment was finished at the end of the year 1541 and opened to the public on Christmas day of that year. Incredible as it may seem Michelangelo now sought once more the Pope's permission to resume work upon the Tomb of Julius which had apparently been at a standstill during the long period of work upon the Medicean Tombs and the Last Judgment. The tenacity with which he clung to this cherished project is astonishing. He had drawn the plan and received the first commission at the age of thirty. He was now sixty-seven. His plan had been "revised, reduced, mutilated, spoiled" but still he clung to it with the tenacity of a first and only love. Critics who have noted only his continual abandonment of one task for another have accused him of fickleness. If this be fickleness where shall we look for constancy?

But again the Pope interfered. A new chapel had just been completed, the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament, later called after its builder, the Capella Paolina, and the Pope, captivated like the men of his time by the stupendous *bravura* of the Last Judgment was determined that it should be decorated by Michelangelo. The tomb contract of seven years before, made at his own dictation, was not allowed to stand in the way. The fourth and final contract which contained the fatal clause already noted releasing Michelangelo from further personal work was now imposed upon both the artist and his patrons. This was accomplished only after a long and bitter struggle which reacted disastrously

upon the artist's peace of mind. The Rovere seem at last to have lost patience and to have compared the heavy outlay of nearly forty years with the poverty of achievement in a manner uncomplimentary to the artist upon whom alone they dared to vent their displeasure. Bad accounting and vague distinction between personal and professional expenditure left the artist at the mercy of his critics. A conscience void of offence is a great personal consolation but it does not meet the requirements of a financial audit. The interval of about a year between the completion of the Last Judgment and the beginning of the frescoes in the Capella Paolina was perhaps the most distressful period of the artist's life. There can be no doubt that it deepened the sense of disillusionment and despondency which was already marked in his latest work. The new contract for the Tomb, though accepted in good faith and executed loyally as circumstances permitted, must have dissipated the last remnant of enthusiasm which the great project had inspired. If the result is disappointing to us what must it have been to him to whose mental vision the magnificent creation of his early imagination was ever present? It astonishes and pains us to learn that he witnessed and in some sense sanctioned the assemblage of these incongruous elements which are a pitiful caricature of the original. Only a mood of utter hopelessness can explain his indifference. Where so much was sacrificed what matters a little more or less, a mood perhaps not the noblest but certainly natural. For eight years more the tragedy dragged its slow length along with the result that we know. Eight years! Think of it! Time enough to have given us another Ceiling, another Moses, and another Dying Youth.

During seven of these eight years Michelangelo was occupied intermittently with the frescoes of the Capella Paolina. They are such as might have been expected, given the character of the Last Judgment, the renewed disappointment in the matter of the Tomb, and the harrowing experiences of the period. The two great frescoes, the Conversion of Saint Paul and the Martyrdom of Saint Peter, betray in more pronounced and extravagant form the unspiritual sensationalism of the Last Judgment. They are rarely seen and never praised in our time. They are as though they did not exist, so completely has the world learned to pass them by, this work of seven lost years.

Might these years have been saved? Might the artist have given us other Ceilings, other Dying Youths, if the world had been more considerate; if circumstances had been more propitious? It always seems so. We are always inclined to explain the waywardness of the spirit by the caprices of circumstance. But the spirit is after all a law unto itself. It is doubtful if passion so intense as that of Michelangelo could have remained long in equipoise, whatever the circumstances. "Incentives come from the soul's self." It is doubtful whether any treatment, any privilege, any favoring circumstance would have long preserved that ineffable marriage of beauty and sorrow which reveals itself in the Dying Youth. Fugitive in the extreme are these perfect spiritual conjunctions. The lesson is: seize the moment rather than try to prolong it. In the Ceiling this was done; in the Tomb it was not. Considering the vicissitudes of human life the wonder is not that the Tomb was a failure but that the Ceiling was a success. It is the one major work of art known to us which was carried to completion by a single artist and in a single

spiritual mood. It was too much to expect another, but oh! it is infinite pity.

The Capella Paolina was finished in 1549 when the artist was seventy-four years of age. Gradually during this period, however, we find him drawn into work of another character which was soon to absorb all his energies. Nearly a generation before a Medicean Pope had set him to work building a library, a sacristy, and the façade of a church. Along with his painting he is now set to building palaces. Before the frescoes are finished he is appointed architect-in-chief of St. Peter's, his old enemy and rival, Bramante, the first architect, having died years before and other architects having tried their hand in the meantime. For this service he refused all salary saying that he would do it for the peace of his soul. This task occupied the remaining seventeen years of his life to the exclusion of painting and sculpture. The great church which he did not live to see finished and which in its present state by no means represents his idea, is the chief monument to his fame as an architect. The dome, in particular, the model of most of the great domes erected since, is his creation. Erected after his death, it conforms strictly to the model which he constructed for the builder's guidance. Though based in principle upon the famous dome of Brunelleschi in Florence it is a brilliant and original development from it and is justly famous.

The diversion of Michelangelo's activity from the art of his choice to architecture has often been regretted. What is even the great dome compared with the Ceiling or the Moses? Yes, but that is not the alternative. It should be compared rather with the frescoes of the Capella Paolina which are representative of the art of his old age. His architecture at its best, it is true,

never arouses the emotions that we feel under the vault of the Sistine but it provokes no such criticism as these later frescoes. May we not rather be thankful that an art more restrained in its essential nature absorbed the energies of these later years and saved the mighty spirit from wandering farther in the path so unhappily chosen?

If we had visited Rome at about the time when Elizabeth ascended the English throne and had employed the inevitable cicerone to show us the "sights" he would have shown us many things mostly inconsequential and doubtfully explained, but among them surely the vast area strewn with blocks of travertine, the stone cutters plying their chisels, the foremen inspecting the work and giving directions, and amidst it all the walls of the great church, largest of all Christian temples, rising like some vast fortress according to a plan kept close locked in the mind of a mysterious old man. Every one knows his name, knows his homely face with its broken nose, knows his fame and the reverence with which men, high and low, bow and lift their caps as he passes. But no one knows Michelangelo. The age that knew him has passed away with its loves and its envies and its hates, and he remains, kindly but taciturn and unapproachable, in the double isolation of old age and of genius. The house in which he lives alone served by a single male servant is not inhospitable but few feel inclined to intrude upon the privacy of the great architect of Saint Peter's.

For it is as such that he is remembered. His earlier works are overshadowed by his present more visible and more impressive task. The Sistine, reserved for the privileged few, fades from the popular memory. His earlier works, if seen at all, hardly recall their author.

To the world he is the architect; the rest was experiment; avocation.

Perchance our visit, by rare good fortune, coincides with one of his tours of inspection. We become conscious that a hush has fallen upon the scene. The garulity of our guide is checked and his voice is lowered as he points out an inconspicuous grey-haired man whose quiet words are listened to with every mark of respect. "That is our great architect, Michelangelo. He is in charge of all the work and it is all being built according to his plans. He is the greatest architect in the world." We are interested. We have heard that name before for it is a name long since heard in far away England and Spain. But for us it has different associations. "Didn't he use to be a sculptor or painter?" "I don't know. Did he? Yes, now that you mention it, I believe I have heard that there are some paintings of his somewhere in the Vatican. But I have never seen them. Somewhere, too, I have seen some sculpture, a Pietà, I think, that they told me was by him. But if he made it it must have been a long time ago. That was when he was young and was feeling his way, before he found his true vocation. He is an architect now, the greatest architect in the world." In some such manner our guide might have reported to us, accurately enough, the judgment of his time. The painter, the sculptor were forgotten.

But if the world had forgotten that sculpture was his first love the artist had not. If unwelcome commissions from unsympathetic patrons had obscured that earlier vision of the beauty of pathos, the vision had not perished. In the sanctuary of that spiritual isolation into which he more and more withdrew the old flame burned upon the altar with as pure a light as of old.-

There was a sensation in the art circles of Rome. Mysterious sounds were heard to issue by night from the house of the great recluse. There could be no mistaking it. It was the sound of a chisel upon marble. Thus reminded they recalled that he had wrought the Pietà two generations ago. What meant this sudden return to a long abandoned art? What was he making? For whom? Had the Pope given him a commission? the Emperor? No information was vouchsafed. No one dared ask. Yet curiosity would not be denied. At last two acquaintances were found brave (or impertinent) enough to call upon the artist by night. Astonished, he opened the door in answer to their knock. By the flickering light of a candle stuck in his cap, the only light in the room, they saw the gleaming marble which was the object of their quest. Unable to conceal their curiosity the artist quickly perceived the purpose of their visit. His old time reluctance to show his work before completion asserted itself. As if by accident the candle fell from his cap to the floor, flickered and went out, and he remarked laconically: "Let us go out with the candle."

Slowly the work progressed. Saint Peter's claimed him by day and the hours available for the mysterious work were stolen from sleep. The old time energy was now far spent. The iron grip was feebler and the eye that once had "seen his angel in the marble" was now less certain and guided the chisel with less precision. At last a slip was made, The errant tool cut too deep. A fault to pardon, we would have said. Smooth it down a little and who will know the difference? But Michelangelo was not working now for those that did not know the difference. Not for popes or cardinals or kings but for himself and for God. Something in the

soul craved utterance and that utterance brooked no error. Seized with a fit of petulance or despair — in his old age he was quite capable of either — he grasped his heavy mallet and began to break it up. Then the old servant who worshipped from afar, in an agony of protest begged that if he would not take further pleasure in it and finish it he would give it to him. Slowly and reluctantly he harkened and desisted from his mad act. And so we have it as he left it that night. It stands, half released from the imprisoning marble, behind the high altar of the great Duomo in Florence where in the conjuring half light it makes its irresistible appeal.

It is impossible not to see in this last work, the only work not made for a patron, not made for pay, the only work not constrained by circumstance or warped by current taste, a unique significance. It is commonly assumed that he intended it for his tomb. It may be doubted if he had so definite an aim, whether he gave a thought as to where it would be placed or who would see it or what the spectator would think. There was something that had to be said before he passed into the great silence.

The theme is, strange to say, essentially the same as the one with which he made his debut at the age of twenty-four, the *Pietà*, or more exactly, the *Descent from the Cross*. It is interesting to compare the two. The first is a sculptural triumph, a marvelous composition, an expression of suppressed pathos, of majesty in sorrow. We admire, we appreciate, we sympathize, but "it wrings no tears from our heart." The tragedy of life appears neither hopeless nor unbearable at twenty-four. How different to the man in the eighties who views life in retrospect and sees the path he entered so hopefully strewn with the wrecks of perished ambitions!

This is the intensest expression of spiritual passion in human art. There are more heartrending outbursts of momentary agony in the art of Tintoretto and many a lesser artist. Of these momentary outbursts Michelangelo's art knows nothing. It is tragedy seen in long perspective, pathos as a summing up of life, that counts. Joseph of Arimathea utters no cry as he lowers the limp figure from the cross nor does Mary sob as she receives the beloved form, or the Magdalen as she renders her less intimate but devoted service. The moment of soul shattering agony is past and the dull tragedy of life doomed to trudge on with leaden feet has come instead.

We recall the two who were walking together and were joined by a third who asked what they were talking about, and one replied: "Dost thou alone sojourn in Jerusalem and not know the things which are come to pass in these days? And he said unto them, What things?" Then they told him of the wonderful leader and of his tragic death, adding: "But we hoped that it was he which should redeem Israel." The saddest sentence in the New Testament, someone has called it. The whole tragedy of existence is epitomized in that past tense.

Men have been far too incontinent to hurry away from this moment of tragedy to the promise of the resurrection, the revival of hope. In so doing they miss something infinitely noble and inspiring. Let us return with Michelangelo to that moment of utter tragedy, the moment when hope is lost, when everything is lost.

Everything? No, not quite. Everything except character, the soul's own self. How amazingly that self stands revealed when hope is lost and the whole objective world of things we covet and aims we cherish, that scaffolding of life which obscures its essence, is



THE DEPOSITION
Cathedral, Florence

swept away and the soul stands alone, divested of all save its loves, its passions, its loyalties, and its ideals! Then alone is revealed the one thing that matters. Is character intact, the soul unscathed? Or has it too gone down in the wreck? This intactness of character is more important than the resurrection; is indeed the only thing that makes a resurrection worth while.

With unerring instinct Michelangelo grasps the spiritual essence of his theme. Hope is gone, utterly gone, but all else is intact. Is there any representation of mother love so absolute as this figure dimly seen through the veil of the uncut marble as, self forgetting, she all but merges herself in the form of her son? Has the tenderness of strong manhood ever manifested itself more simply or more sincerely than in the bowed figure of Joseph of Arimathea as he lowers the beloved form from the cross? Love without hope, tragedy without weakness, these are the last words of the great prophet of pathos.

May we not in a sense see in the Descent from the Cross Michelangelo's last will and testament, the summation of his philosophy, the things learned by living? At the risk of perverting by translation that which he expressed in the language of his art let us try to state his meaning in our vernacular.

Life is a failure. Expect it; be prepared for it. You will not realize your ambitions; you cannot do the things you set out to do. As thus defined and measured life is a failure.

But *you* need not be a failure. You can not do what you set out to do but one thing you may do. You can give back your soul to God as he gave it, unsullied and unscathed.

Look again at this group, the lifeless Christ, the de-

voted mother, the strong bowed form of Joseph. Do these speak of weakness or collapse? Dreams have faded; hope is lost; but that which matters is still intact. Judge it as we will this is the great artist's last message.

Out of the night that compassed me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods there be
For my unconquerable soul.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

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